

WELCOME HOME, SOLDIER

A NEW YEAR'S EVE SHORT STORY



EVA MOORE



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For My Friends in the Old School Romance Book Club

INTRODUCTION

Dear Readers,

This story was inspired by an event I run every year in the Old School Romance Book Club on Facebook. The Fantasy Ball is an online event where women from all over the globe choose gowns, shoes, a charity, dates, and fictional heroes to “compete” for amazing prizes. Think Fantasy Football but for romance readers! It’s the highlight of my year.

Our theme was a Contemporary Bachelor Auction Ball, and the characters these women created were so compelling, we decided to write stories set in that world, fanfic style. The Ball is in London at the Ritz on New Year’s Eve in support of our winning charity, K9s For Warriors.

I hope you enjoy this short glimpse into our Fantasy Ball. Happy New Year!

WELCOME HOME, SOLDIER

By Eva Moore

CHAPTER 1



“**O**ur next bachelor of the evening is a Marine currently serving the US Embassy here in London. He’s raising funds for Team K9, the group supporting K9s for Warriors. Please welcome Staff Sergeant Michael Robinson to the stage!”

Amid the excited screaming from the single ladies in the crowd, Emmeline’s blood ran cold. She was grateful to be sitting down as her knees turned to jelly. Michael Robinson. It had been years since she’d heard that name aloud, although not a day went by that she hadn’t wondered what he’d been up to in the ten years since they’d parted. It was a generous turn of phrase that gave her the illusion of agency in their parting, when in reality she’d returned from a trip to find him gone without a trace. But she’d give her heart any armor she could muster.

Her mind immediately supplied several of the thousands of images she’d worked hard to repress. His russet fingertips tracing her pale pink curves, his infinitely kissable lips breaking into the smile that had stolen her heart, her hands anchored in the rioting corkscrew curls that lent him his boyish charm, pulling him closer to end his ruthless teasing. Those stolen moments in his

arms, in his bed, had tormented her for ten long years with one relentless question. *What happened?*

Shaking herself mentally, she marshaled her thoughts and put her public mask on to hide her inner turmoil. She was probably angsty over nothing. It couldn't be him. Standing slowly, she turned toward the stage, her height and heels giving her the advantage of being able to see over the mass of rowdy ladies assembled at this charity ball. The stage, decorated in draping panels of gold and cream silk, was occupied by Evangeline Moore in full flapper attire, to match the theme of the evening. She was alone at the mike, but she had turned to watch the back curtain.

The man walking confidently towards the front of the stage was the right height and had the same beautiful dark skin as her memory man, but that was where the similarities ended. His hair was shaved up the back of his neck and disappeared under the brilliant white cap perched on his head. His face was stoic as he marched towards the evening's Mistress of Ceremonies, something she'd never seen before. The navy jacket with meticulously polished brass buttons and the royal blue slacks with a stripe of red down the side were new, too. A Marine? No way her Michael, her idealistic, impulsive, passionate Michael, was a Marine. Ms. Moore interrupted her musings with more of the patter she'd been spouting all evening.

"Here you go, ladies. Your very own Officer and a Gentleman for the evening. Shall we start the bidding at £500?"

Then it happened.

"No offense, ma'am, but Richard Gere was in the Navy. Your winner will get a date with a Marine. Start the bidding at six hundred." Laughter from the ladies competed with boos from the already claimed bachelors in the audience, and a grin spread across the Marine's face. And not just any grin. Michael's grin. It was him. Suddenly the strange events of the last week snapped into clearer focus. How had she not seen this coming?

Her aunt's insistence that she join her in London for New Year's ahead of her trip to Geneva to address the U.N. The mysterious delivery of this perfectly tailored dark cranberry velvet couture gown the same day Aunt Tabby had suggested going to this gala event benefiting veteran charities without her.

"Oh dearest, you know I'm delighted to spend time with you, but you are young and single in London on New Year's Eve. I absolutely forbid you to sit here quaffing champers with me in the library watching early fireworks when you could be dancing the night away with a handsome gent on your arm."

If she had only known which gent her aunt had meant, she'd have been better prepared to handle the situation.

This was a set-up of epic proportions. She'd lived in D.C. long enough to sniff out a conspiracy. The question now was what to do next.

As the bidding grew heated, jumping rapidly in £50 increments, she pondered her options. She could walk out, pride intact, but with her curiosity roused that felt like a non-solution.

£800! £850!

She could stay and see if she could corner him somewhere later and have the conversation he'd owed her for nearly a decade, but she doubted his winning lady would relinquish him willingly.

£1200! £1300!

Which left her with only one real option.

"£10,000!" She raised her hand and her voice.

At least it would go to a worthy cause, uniting veterans struggling with PTSD issues with service rescue dogs. She'd admired K9s For Warriors work in the past, and her credit card could handle the hit.

"Excuse me? Did I hear £10,000?" Evangeline shaded her eyes against the bright stage lights and peered out into the crowd.

Emmeline waved her hand and stepped through the crowd towards the stage.

“£10,000 right here.”

“Do I hear £10,050? Going once... twice... sold to the lady in red.”

She met Michael’s eye boldly, confident that her public mask was firmly in place, calm and serene. His smile faded to blank, and he gave her a brief nod as if accepting an inevitable but unpleasant assignment. This was going to be good.



HE’D KNOWN. From the moment his commanding officer had requested that he remain in London through the holidays for an extra two weeks to participate in this charity ball in an official capacity before returning stateside for discharge, he’d known it was a horrible idea. But the Marines had made him a man, and a man took care of his responsibilities. His official honorable discharge date wasn’t until February, so technically he was still compelled to follow orders even though his active duty as an Embassy guard had finished. In a few short weeks he’d be a civilian again, but a Marine in his heart for life.

He’d planned to track her down, make his case, and plead for a second chance. But he’d also planned on having more time to figure out what to say to the woman he still loved despite the intervening years of silence. His first glimpse of her luminous beauty left him tongue-tied, and suddenly all he could do was nod and hold himself stiffly, hoping that his tight dress uniform wouldn’t betray his sudden ‘excitement.’ Judging by the look on her face, she was less than happy to see him. She never wore that public face with him unless she was pissed. He was suddenly grateful for his Marine training in evading capture and resisting interrogation. He had a feeling that’d come in handy soon as he tracked her movements towards the cashier desk.

“Go meet your date at the cashier. You’re hers through

midnight. Be sure to get her contact info and set up your second date before the clock strikes twelve, Cinderella.” Evangeline gave him a little nudge to get him moving so she could announce the next poor Joe.

The groans of disappointment followed him offstage, but he barely registered them. He was laser focused on his prize. This was his chance. He couldn’t blow it. When he’d asked her father, Senator Jack Krane for his daughter’s hand the man had considered him carefully. Michael would never forget the look of cold regret in his eyes.

“She’s only eighteen. Yes, she’s lovely, but she’s still a child. What kind of parent would I be to cut off her opportunities before she’s even had a chance to see what lies ahead of her as an adult? I won’t ask her to say no, but I will ask you to do the right thing. Really, son, it’s the right thing for you, too. What have you done with your life? You’ve barely graduated from college. Go out and see the world. Find your passion. Do the things that will make you a man. Then come back and see me.”

He’d left that very night, walking away from his internship at the campaign headquarters without a backwards glance. He’d cursed his temper for years for stealing his chance to say good-bye to Emmie. They’d shared a kiss before she had left for the airport with her mother that fateful morning, but he’d been gone before she returned from her cousin’s society wedding. If only he’d been more humble and patient, he could have held out a week and held her one last time to explain. But he’d been impulsive and hotheaded. His mind had landed on a plan, and he’d implemented it immediately.

Unfortunately, that meant that by the time she had returned to D.C., he had already been immersed in Marine Basic Training and unable to contact her. When he tried later on, her cell number was disconnected and the campaign office always said she wasn’t taking any calls. When a photo of her on some

polished prep's arm at a fundraiser ran in the papers, he knew he'd lost her for now. It only made him more determined to be good enough to claim her as his forever.

Reaching out to do just that, he placed a hand at the base of her neck, a gesture he'd repeated more times than he could count, and thrilled to feel the answering shiver chase down her spine. She straightened and spun, and he drank in his first sight of Emmeline Krane in the flesh in over a decade. Her chestnut locks still swept up in an elegant twist, though fewer tendrils were attempting escape than before. She was wearing a wine red velvet gown that made him feel tipsy before he'd even had a taste. The cutout panels tempted him to touch and revealed that her girlish figure had grown more womanly in the intervening years. Curves in all the right places made his mouth water with desire.

His eyes rose to her lips that matched her dress and wondered if she'd still taste like the Altoids she used to pop like candy. She pursed her gorgeous mouth, and he nearly groaned before marshaling his wits to the task at hand. He finally met her eye-to-eye, ready to fight for the love of his life.

The dark brown pools threatened to pull him in and drown him. Literally. His love was pissed.

"Don't touch me. You lost that privilege a long time ago."

"You're still holding a grudge?"

"Holding a grudge? Over being dumped by my FATHER on your behalf because you didn't have the decency to tell me yourself? No. That would be petty and small. I've simply grown up, and I can tell a man that I no longer wish to have him touch me."

"But we both know you do want me to touch you, as much as I want to touch you."

"Try me." The don't-fuck-with-me look in her eyes only made her more of a challenge, and Michael felt himself rising to it.

"You certainly have grown up, Emmie. You're stunning." He watched an unwilling blush creep up over her collarbone to her neck. Finally, he'd said something right.

“No one calls me that anymore. I’m Emmeline Krane, and I bought your time so we could talk, not flirt.”

I plan to do both and a whole lot more...

CHAPTER 2



Emmeline lifted a glass of champagne from a passing waiter's tray and strode for the nearest exit. If she was going to have an emotional meltdown, she didn't want any witnesses. The fact that she could feel herself on the brink of one surprised her. She thought she'd put this mess of a relationship behind her years ago. She refused to look back and see if he was following her. After all hadn't she just done the one thing she hadn't been able to all those years ago? Command his attention and hold it? The Michael she had known then had been so bright and full of energy. He never sat still, never backed down from a challenge, and never gave her the time of day, until that one terrible day changed everything.

Despite the fear the memories dredged up, she'd never been able to put that day from her mind because it had brought him into her life. They'd all been on a raised outdoor platform supporting the Senator at yet another stump rally. Not the way an eighteen-year-old imagines spending the summer before college, but it was an election year. Every Krane knew their part and was expected to play it flawlessly. No one said no to Jack Krane. She'd gotten adept at wearing her public mask, but she'd

been bored stupid behind it. When Mike had come to stand next to her, she'd welcomed the handsome distraction. She'd been watching him all summer, too shy to approach. Placed firmly in the out-of-reach category, she'd contented herself with subtle ogling and very vivid fantasies. Lost in one of those fantasies, she'd been slow to react when her father's security team leapt into action, yelling, "Shooter! Gun! Get down!"

Suddenly six-feet, two-inches of toned male flesh had pressed her into the ground. He'd cupped his arms around her head, and she'd never felt so safe in all her life. She'd gripped her arms tightly around his chest, as afraid of losing that feeling as she had been of finding the man with the gun. As the security team handled the situation, quickly subduing the criminal, she'd drawn strength from his courage and found her own. Reaching up, she had placed a kiss along his jawline and inhaled deeply. She wanted to remember every second.

"Thank you." She could tell the moment she finally snagged his attention. His luminous eyes snapped to hers, full of questions, which she answered with a second kiss. The combination of his taste and his scent had been tempting, but being the center of his attention was addictive. One sample and she was hooked. It had been the beginning of a brief but intense affair. She'd thought he'd been as attracted as she was, until he'd suddenly poofed into thin air. Not a trace. Not a word. *Time to find out why.*

The narrow hallway she'd led them down turned out to be a staff access route between the kitchen and the ballroom. Servers in cigarette girl uniforms were bustling back and forth with trays of appetizers and drinks, too busy to be bothered with two lost guests. At least they wouldn't draw attention. She turned and watched him saunter up behind her, his own champagne flute dangling carelessly between three fingers, too handsome for his own good. But gone was the boy she knew. The man before her was nearly unrecognizable.

"So, the Marines?" *That's good. Take control of the conversation.*

“As you can see.” He removed the white hat from his head, and Emmeline almost cried out at the close-cropped curls he revealed. He looked good in his uniform, but the loss of his wild curls that she had loved to dive her fingers into during their stolen moments hit her hard. It was yet another concrete reminder that things had changed. She marshaled her bouncing emotions and asked the next question.

“How long?”

“Since the day I left.”

“Why? Why did you leave without a word?” There it was. The question she’d been waiting to ask forever. He stopped walking, stricken, as if her words had slapped him across the face.

“I didn’t.”

“I think I’m in a better position to know what you did and didn’t tell me.” Her voice pitched higher, and her words flowed out one on top of the other as if they’d spilled over the dam she’d built to contain her pain and sadness. She was helpless to stem the tide. “One minute I’m following my mom to some family wedding and fundraising dinner, counting the hours until I could get back to you. The next, poof! You’re gone without a trace. Not a word to anyone. No note. You didn’t answer your phone or reply to your email. Just gone. So, I’ll ask you again. Why?”

“Emmie, you have to believe me...” Whatever he was about to say was drowned out by an influx of the catering crew. More servers flooded the hallway bearing trays of fancy petit fours and more champagne to the happy revelers in the ballroom beyond. Emmeline contemplated snagging an entire tray of the mini cakes, but clamped down on that impulse just as she had every unladylike impulse for as long as she could remember. No matter that her heart was tearing apart at the seams. Heaven forbid someone see her stuffing her face with cake to numb the pain. Her mother’s voice was never far from her mind.

It must be nearing midnight, but Emmeline had no desire to rejoin the party. She wanted him to finish his sentence. He tried

twice to speak above the distraction, before he growled and grabbed her hand, pulling her through the nearest door.

She struggled to draw in a full breath in the dark storage closet, filled with unused folding chairs and tables not called into service tonight. He filled the impossibly tight space with his presence, demanding her attention and stealing the air from her lungs. He moved even closer until she would brush his chest with her own if she took the deep breath her lungs craved. Inhaling deeply, with his scent surrounding her and her body tingling, would be a sure sign of madness. *Don't do it. Resist.* She warned her flaring senses. She wouldn't get the answers she came for. *But you might come.* Her senses were being decidedly unhelpful. Emmeline deliberately looked away into the dimness, trying to break the spell.

Michael was having none of it. He brushed his fingers across her cheekbones back towards her ear, turning the caress into a grip. He held her face in his work-roughened hands as gently as he might a precious diamond.

"Em, you have to believe me. I left you a note. I may have been impulsive, but I wasn't a complete asshole."

"I don't have to believe anything. I know that one minute you were there and the next you were gone. What happened?"

"Your father happened. I went to talk to him while you were gone." Emmeline's stomach hollowed out, as if she hadn't eaten in days. It had been a common enough response to her father's overbearing demands in her youth, exerting control over food since she had no control anywhere else. Her stress brought the muscle memory into crystalline focus. She could just imagine how that meeting had gone down. "I wanted to bring our relationship out in the open, maybe lay the groundwork for eventually asking for your hand."

"Not his to give." She shook her head, trying to dislodge her father's voice lecturing her on the importance of saving herself and staying away from boys. She knew exactly how this had

played out. Her father, rational and confident, would have ruthlessly pushed aside every argument, like a snowplow on Christmas. You might get hit in the face with the slush, but it was always for the greater good.

“You were eighteen. It felt like the right thing to do. I told him how I felt about you, how I believed you felt about me. I asked for his permission to date you openly. He declined.”

“Again, not his decision.”

“Again, I was young and stupid, and he wasn’t just your dad. He was my boss and mentor, my potential foot in the door for my own political career. He didn’t yell or threaten me.”

No, that’s not his style. She wished she couldn’t see the picture he was painting quite so clearly. Her father, stone-faced and precise, had the power to eviscerate with his razor sharp words. Luckily, years of lashes had built up a thick layer of scar tissue, so when she’d shared her plan to work for the U.N. she’d had the strength to go against his wishes.

“He laid out a clear and cogent argument, just like he does on the Senate floor. I was young, he said, just out of college. I didn’t know what I was going to do after the campaign, let alone with the rest of my life. I had a lot of things to figure out. I was being influenced by a traumatic event.”

“That’s bullshit. You’ve always had a plan.”

“He was persuasive, and then he started on you. You were just heading off to college. You didn’t know your own mind yet. Did I really want to steal the experiences of college from you by leaving you pining between classes? He asked me to stay away, come back when I was a man. He knew my ambitions in politics and mentioned several times that military service was viewed favorably in the polls. The path to you seemed pretty clear once he laid it all out.”

All Emmeline could do was shake her head. So many years lost because her father thought he knew what was best for everyone. A side effect of being a twenty-year Senator, making the best

decisions for everyone in his constituency and the nation, she supposed. She wondered if she'd ever be able to remove herself from his emotional district. She was a grown woman, and he was still trying to influence the decisions in her life. The idea that he'd decided what should make her happy, thereby leaving her alone and depressed for years, was the last straw.

Michael's thumb brushed her cheek, and she realized her frustration was leaking down her face.

"You remember how hotheaded I was. He made me so angry and frustrated with his unassailable logic that I marched right down to the military recruiters office and signed the papers that day. I didn't realize until it was too late that I'd given him exactly what he wanted. Before you got back from your trip, I was in Basic Training at Parris Island, South Carolina. But I swear, I left you a letter in your bunk on the bus telling you all of this."

All she could do was shake her head as tears threatened to destroy her carefully applied mascara and her meticulously maintained façade of poise. Years of bottled up misery were waiting to break lose, and if she opened her mouth, she was terrified of what might spill out.

CHAPTER 3



“Don’t cry. Please, don’t cry.”

Michael took her glass from her hand and set it next to his on a storage shelf. Women’s tears made him anxious, desperate to find a way to make them stop. The few times he’d seen his mother cry as a child still ranked among the scariest moments of his childhood. A similar panic rose in him now, and he reacted swiftly. He brushed the tears from her cheeks, as if he could erase her pain, and lowered his lips to hers. Her kisses had always made him feel better. He hoped the reverse was true, too.

The feel of her lips pressing against his in the dim light flashed him back ten years to a bedroom in a cheap motel on the campaign trail, lit only by the late afternoon light filtering through heavy curtains. Their first deliberate kiss, a week after the shooting, had the same soft and inevitable feeling as this one. It felt like the homecoming he’d longed for, even though they were still far from home.

With gentle brushes and glides he coaxed her into the moment, until he felt her begin to respond, her desire outpacing her regrets. When she gripped his face and pulled him closer, he knew he’d succeeded in beating back the darkness that had

threatened. Her tongue darted between his lips. Michael grinned at the familiar minty tingle and gave himself over to the kiss, determined to make up for lost time.

The Venn Diagram in his head was rapidly filling with details, new and old. Same sexy saunter, same crisp taste, same gorgeous hair. Different attitude, a different confidence in her kiss, a different feel beneath his hands. That last was his downfall.

As he slid his hands lower, eager to explore her new terrain, he encountered a land mine in the form of bare skin through a cut out at the base of her spine. His mind exploded into a thousand tiny sparks of desire. The time for finesse and analysis had passed.

He wanted more, and he wanted it now. His hands urgently searched out all of her surprises, the warm velvet no competition against the lure of her satin skin. If he could defuse these ticking time bombs of passion, maybe everything would be OK. Or maybe they'd go down in flames. *Hell of a way to go.* With his mouth still fused to hers, his hand slid down to her ass on a reconnaissance mission, determined to learn her every curve. He needed to bring her as close as her fancy dress would allow. He wanted nothing to stand between them.

He loosed a tortured groan when her soft belly cradled his hardness. Keeping his hands off her had been a challenge that long ago summer, knowing she was young and his boss's daughter. He'd done his best to ignore her until that fateful day that changed everything. He knew exactly how amazing the girl had been back then; he could only imagine the woman she'd become. No, not true. He was doing a hell of a lot more than imagining right now. How often did daydreams become a reality?

Brushing her breasts with his hands only made the tingling in his hands worse. His thumbs sought out her sensitive nipples. He remembered the exact shape, color, and size of them and that she'd loved to have them tugged and sucked hard into his mouth. He didn't remember her having this much breast behind them,

but he certainly wasn't complaining. Grinning, he tweaked her through her dress, the soft velvet rasping between her and his fingers. He swallowed her gasp with his kiss and enjoyed the resulting hip roll. God, she was glorious. He'd missed her so much. All he could think was...more.

When his hand brushed the cleverly hidden zipper, hers moved to his chest and pushed, firmly.

"Stop."

Michael pressed his lips together, both to bite back his protest and also to stop the tingling. She'd pushed him so far past his control that it took serious effort to pull himself back in. After fasting for years, the smallest taste of her was overpowering. Battered by old memories and new sensations, he gripped his hands behind his back and prayed for restraint, while they figured out the next step

"I can't do this." She shook her head repeatedly and looked around the room, as if trying to figure out how she'd gotten into this situation. Of course, he was seducing her in a storage closet. Jeez, real smooth, Robinson.

"I have a room upstairs."

"Let me be clear. I can't do this. At all."

She couldn't mean that. Not after what they'd just shared. He had to convince her.

"Emmie..."

"Don't call me that." She pressed her hand to her heart as if he'd physically struck her, trying to shield it from further endearments. He had never wanted to hurt her, and it broke his heart that his name for her caused her pain. He held up his hands in helpless surrender.

"No more. I promise."

"I am a public figure, a U.N. Goodwill Ambassador. I can't be caught in a compromising position in a storage closet."

"Whatever you say." *The lady doth protest too much.* "I still owe you a date."

She wrung her hands together though he doubted she noticed. Her face revealed nothing. She'd been an open book at eighteen. Yet another difference to add to the chart, but this one he felt guilty for causing.

"My schedule is pretty tight. I leave for Geneva in three days."

"I can make that work. Can you meet me here tomorrow at noon?" His mind was spinning with plans to convince her. How could he make her stay? Give her exactly what she wanted.

"I don't think..."

He couldn't let Emmeline finish that sentence and put an end to his plans before he even had a chance to begin. He grabbed her hand and shook it, as if he could seal the deal.

"You spent £10,000 for a date, and I never welch on a deal. Besides we aren't done clearing the air. Come prepared to ask any questions you need. If nothing else, we can put the past behind us."

He prayed it would stay far enough behind them that it wouldn't screw up his chance at a future.

"Tomorrow. Noon. I'll meet you in the lobby." His heart wanted to dance at her agreement, but he managed to keep his cool.

"You won't regret it, Emmie."

"Don't make me. And it's Emmeline."

With that she retrieved her glass of champagne and left, leaving Michael in the dark in more ways than one.

CHAPTER 4



Emmeline paced her room at her Aunt Tabby's house in Chester Square, Belgravia. The luxurious room, with clean lines and sumptuous fabrics in shades of gray and taupe, was a thoroughly modern homage to the original décor of the townhouse. Aunt Tabby had redone it the year before, and it belonged in a magazine. In fact, Em believed it had been featured in an eight-page spread in some London glossy. Sadly, the comfortable surroundings did little to soothe her frayed nerves. She crossed the floor to the fire in the grate and chafed her hands in front of it to try and warm up. She'd felt oddly cold and empty ever since she'd walked away from the ball.

Michael Robinson and his mega-watt smile still had the power to melt her spine. Leaving him in that storage closet should have felt like a victory, not a retreat. This was bad. Very bad. It had taken years to overcome his desertion last time. If she were being completely, three-a.m.-alone-in-the-dark, honest with herself, that recovery was a thin veneer over her still bruised heart.

Now, he was a Marine, and she was a U.N. Ambassador. She

was traveling around the world to shine a spotlight on humanitarian crises, and he was being deployed to fight military ones. With the Marine Corps in charge of his deployments, there was no way to guarantee they'd even be in the same country. This couldn't work without serious sacrifice on both of their parts, and when had she started thinking about making something work between them?

A knock on the door interrupted her racing thoughts.

"Come in, Aunt Tabby."

"Good morning, darling. I missed you at breakfast. How was the ball?"

"Come to London, you said. I'm lonely, you said. How did you know he'd be there?"

Her aunt didn't even try to hide the knowledge of her trickery. Aunt Tabby's home had been a refuge for Emmeline on summer breaks in non-election years. She'd known of her struggles to break free from her parents and the political life they led. And she'd dried many of Em's tears as she worked through the pain of Michael's disappearance. To have those deep revelations used against her this way felt like a betrayal. The smirk on her aunt's face wasn't helping Emmeline keep her temper under wraps.

"Fitzy has connections at the Embassy. When I heard about the ball, I may have pulled some strings."

"But why would you ambush me with it?"

"Would you have gone?"

Would she have gone? Would she have found the courage to face him if she'd had time to think about it? Jesus, she was having trouble working up the courage to meet him for a date, and she'd already done the hardest part of confronting him.

"From your silence, I believe I was right. You needed the opportunity to move past this. Be honest. This relationship has affected how you've seen every other relationship since. Don't you deserve to be free from that? And if you didn't agree with

me, you'd have walked away from the auction with no one the wiser."

Aunt Tabby was right, but Emmeline hated to admit it. She'd be insufferably smug at family gatherings from here on out. Tabby would never stop meddling if she kept succeeding. How long had she been plotting this intervention? Emmeline's stomach dropped as the pieces of the puzzle began to slip into place.

"How long have you known he was here?" Her aunt had the grace to look away, but Emmeline persisted. "Aunt Tabby, how long have you known he was in London?"

"Six months. We attended the Fourth of July festivities at the Embassy, and he was introduced to us as one of the active duty guards."

Six months. He'd been here this whole time, and she hadn't known. It seemed impossible. In all the times she tried to find him, the military had never occurred to her.

"So where is he taking you?"

"I'm meeting him back at the Ritz."

"Hmm." Aunt Tabby pursed her lips in disapproval.

"What?"

"Honey, far be it from me to tell you what to do..." Emmeline didn't bother to suppress her snort. "But is that wise? I've met the man. If you still have questions you want answered, you need to keep him away from any room with a bed. Think about it." The problem was getting Michael in a bed had been the only thing Em had been able to think about since that incendiary kiss last night. Aunt Tabby had a point. "Holmes has a breakfast tray for you in the kitchen. Just ring if you get hungry. I'll leave you to get ready."

"I don't know if I'll ever be ready for this."

Aunt Tabby pulled her in tight for a hug and a quick buss to the forehead. Em let the comfort of her embrace soothe the rough edges.

“Darling girl, we are never ready for the difficult moments in life, but we tackle them anyway. You’re a Krane. Tackling challenges is in your DNA.” Emmeline swiftly pushed the image of tackling Michael from her mind before it could show on her face. “And remember, I am always here for you when you need me. I love you.”

“I love you, too, Aunt Tabby, but next time you decide to engineer a difficult moment for me, give a girl a head’s up.”

Chuckling, Aunt Tabby made her way to the door, taking her humor and comfort with her, but her wisdom remained. Aunt Tabby was right. If there was anything she’d learned in the last ten years, it was that Emmeline Krane was strong and could handle whatever life threw at her. Back then, she had wanted a different life. She’d been perfectly content to support him in his political aspirations. Now, that role felt empty. She’d filled her life with worthwhile goals of her own, and she wasn’t about to toss it all aside for a man. She wondered what he would say to that little revelation. She could certainly handle Michael Robinson’s reaction and the uncomfortable questions ahead. Her own reactions to the only man to ever push her buttons were another story. Maybe her aunt was on to something about the hotel...



MICHAEL HAD CHECKED and rechecked his mission plan. It was fool proof, which was good since he turned into a bumbling fool whenever he was near Emmie Krane. Operation Mike Echo was a go.

Step 1: Apologize

Step 2: Answer Questions

Step 3: Apologize Again

Step 4: Convince Her To Try Again (insert flowers, wine, room service)

NOW ALL HE had to do was wait. It felt like he'd been waiting half of his adult life for this chance. What were a few more minutes? An eternity. When he'd joined up, he'd done so with the single-minded determination of the young to prove his elders wrong. The United States Marines had indeed made a man out of him, as Senator Krane had implied, and along the way his mission had shifted. He'd taken pride in his achievements and found satisfaction in serving his country at home and abroad. He'd found his purpose.

Had he stayed in D.C., he wasn't sure he'd have kept his desire to serve others. He could see how easily he would have fallen for Emmie and been content to keep working for her father just to be close to her, to hell with his own plans. After ten years in the Marines, his commitment to public service was stronger than ever. He'd proven that to himself in Quantico, and again in Baghdad, Beijing, and London, guarding U.S. Embassies.

But even as he'd chased adventure and duty around the globe, coming "home" to Emmie had always been the end game. Now that he was almost a civilian again, his dream of serving his country through politics flared even brighter. In every scenario, his mind placed Emmie by his side.

Now if she would just get here, he could get on with making those dreams a reality.

He tucked an optimistic condom in his pocket for good luck and made sure his room was tidy. He'd splurged on the luxury hotel for two nights, reasoning that he deserved the treat after months of active duty. The fact that their housekeeping service was top-notch was an added bonus. The room was cleaner than a barrack before inspection. When his watch showed 11:45 a.m. he headed down to the lobby, confident that his room would pass muster. He exited the elevators, and there she was.

He'd take it as a good sign that she was early, eager even. The tan pea coat she wore hid her from view, and he itched to take it off of her. Her cranberry scarf matched the color riding high on

her cheekbones from the wind. Black leggings revealed every curve of her strong legs before disappearing into her tall camel colored riding boots. Not exactly dressed for a fancy date, but she was here. That was all he needed.

“Emmie, I mean, Emmeline, I’m so glad you came. You look lovely, but cold. Let’s get you upstairs and warmed up.”

Her cheeks reddened even more, and he realized how she’d interpreted what he’d said. *Damn it, subconscious. Get your shit together!*

“That’s not what I meant! I’ve just got our date arranged upstairs, and I thought you might be more comfortable in a warm room.” He resisted the urge to slap his forehead. *Way to botch the opening, idiot.*

“Actually, I was thinking we could take a stroll around the park.” She gestured behind her to Green Park, which flanked Buckingham Palace in the near distance.

“Oh.” He watched his original image for their date crumble, but no matter. He was a marine, trained to think on his feet and improvise in a crisis. Oo-rah! “Sure. That sounds nice.” Luckily, he’d chosen a sweater over his cotton t-shirt this morning, because she had already turned for the door, and he was not letting her walk away from the potential between them.

CHAPTER 5



Emmeline hustled back into the brisk air. If she didn't cool down, she might spontaneously combust and jump him in the lobby, which was definitely not on the list of approved activities for the senator's daughter. If she'd thought he was handsome in his uniform, he was devastating in casual civilian wear. All of her earlier mental reassurances of her own strength of conviction burnt to a crisp in the flames of desire she saw in his eyes. He'd mistaken her overheated cheeks for a chill and she hadn't corrected him. How did he still have the power to turn her on with a glance after ten years apart?

His hunter green sweater clung to his shoulders and torso, making sure Emmeline could see and admire every hard-earned muscle beneath. He was a lot harder than he used to be. She couldn't help but wonder how that hardness would feel around her, against her, inside her.

Her eyes had tracked down his long jean-clad legs, and she blushed at the direction her thoughts had taken. Aunt Tabby had been right, not that she had any attention of admitting it to the old biddy. They needed to be far away from all beds for this conversation.

She strode into the brisk wind, her thoughts whirling like long-dry leaves of her past. She kept her face carefully blank in case any paparazzi were following them. As a well-known public figure, she had been taught from an early age to assume that someone was always watching. This ingrained reaction was yet another reason to hash this out in an open space. If she could keep her public mask in place, maybe she could get to the answers she needed without revealing just how badly he'd broken her heart all those years ago.

"Slow down." He hustled up from behind her and took her hand in his. "What are you running from?"

That was a loaded question, and she wasn't about to unpack it all before she'd gotten her own questions answered.

"I'm not running. I'm here, aren't I?" They crossed the street and entered the well-manicured grounds of Green Park. Even though the bright and colorful flowerbeds laid dormant beneath the winter frost, and the trees stretched bare, spindly arms to the sky seeking warmth, the park in winter was still pleasing to the eye. Green grass and well-tended paths invited her to wander. Which way should she go? She took the frigid air deep into her lungs, hoping it would cool the heat traveling up her arm and clear her head, currently buzzing with a thousand questions. She needed her wits about her.

"So to recap, you talked to my dad for permission we didn't need. He told you to be a man, so you joined the marines and disappeared without a word for ten years? Have I got that right?" She tried to keep her tone light, but she heard hints of her bitterness sneaking through.

"No."

"No? No to what part of that?"

"I left you a letter in your bunk. I wrote letters from basic, and I never got a single reply. I tried to call you when I got out, and your number had been disconnected. All of my emails bounced back. At the time I thought the message was pretty

clear, but judging by the look on your face, perhaps I was wrong.”

So much for keeping her composure. Her jaw had dropped open, and she stopped walking, the shock of hearing the alternative version of the narrative she’d clung to over the years breaking her fabled control to smithereens. Could it be true? And if it was, how had it happened? She’d pushed that time away in her memories for so long that now she struggled to bring details to the surface.

“But I saw no note. Or any letters either.”

“I have my theories about your father and the note on your bed. I sent the letters to the campaign offices, since that was the only address I knew for you by heart. Four months later, the campaign was over, and I lost even that. By then, I had been accepted into OCS. I had to go under again, and by the time I surfaced it was like we’d never existed.”

“Well, that explains at least that piece of the puzzle.” Em shook her head as uneven edges began to line up in her mind.

“How so?”

“Do you remember the press that summer? I was eighteen and the perfect daughter. My picture was everywhere. I got dozens of love letters a day addressed to the campaign office. Some poor intern was instructed to destroy them all after reading them for threat analysis. I always felt bad for the poor guy who had to wade through all the bad poetry and rainbows.”

“For the record, my poetry was heartfelt if sappy. But what about your cell phone and email?” She could see the worry on his face that he’d misjudged her lack of communication as well.

“I don’t know...” She shook her head and a vague memory surfaced. “Wait! I do remember! I came back from that trip, and Dad gave Mom and I new SIM cards. There had been some kind of security breach so everything had to be switched to new numbers and new servers. There were super strict filters. I had

trouble getting any emails from friends for months. Do you think...”

They had stopped walking beneath a barren tree, as if it could offer them some shade from the truth emerging between them. She faced him, still gripping his hand like an anchor in the storm.

“Do I think what?”

“Note missing from my bed. Letters destroyed. Cell number changed. Emails filtered. Do you think my dad was deliberately trying to keep us apart?”

“I can’t speculate on what was deliberate and what was chance. All I can say is I’m grateful to have this chance to talk to you about it all. I’ve spent years trying to figure out where I went wrong. I’ve missed you.” He pulled their joined hands closer, wrapping his free arm around her shoulders and pulling her in for a hug.

“Ten years. I lost ten years with you.” The kiss he pressed to her forehead closed her throat with tears. She lifted her chin to meet his eyes. “I missed you, too,” she whispered, before giving him the kiss she’d been saving for him for a third of her life.

Unlike his searing kiss that had overwhelmed her the day before, she kept hers deliberately gentle, slowly spilling her bursting heart into it. She poured all of the love and regret she’d bottled up inside into one tender meeting of lips. She melted from the inside out as he tenderly cupped her cheek, never letting go of his grip on her other hand.

She felt him shake in her embrace, clearly as moved by these revelations as she was. She broke the kiss and looked at him and realized the tremors were an involuntary reaction to the cold. She’d been so caught up in her own tumultuous thoughts that she hadn’t registered that the sweater that so lovingly showcased his physique might not be thick enough to ward off a London winter.

True to his marine training, he hadn’t complained a bit. Even now he was moving in for another kiss, ignoring his own

discomfort for the sake of her touch. She placed her fingers on his trembling lips to pause his forward motion.

“Let’s take this back to the hotel. We have a lot of catching up to do.” Aunt Tabby’s advice be damned.

“You’re damn right we do.” Before he’d even finished speaking, he’d turned and tugged her impatiently up the path behind him, her hand still warmly clasped in his own. Grateful that he’d chosen to hold on to hope just as firmly after all these years, she followed his lead, just as eager to “catch up.”

CHAPTER 6



His hand was still shaking as he attempted to slide the key in the locked door of his hotel room. He couldn't tell if it was from the cold or the surge of anticipation. The past was behind them. They could finally get to work on a future, but he planned to enjoy the hell out of the present first. He took a deep breath and stilled his hand long enough to open the damn door. They made it inside his room, and the door clicked shut behind them, loudly highlighting the silence that had fallen between them.

This was his chance, his moment to show this woman that they deserved another shot. He couldn't afford to screw this up. What was his plan? He knew he'd had a plan, but his mind was so full of her he was drawing a blank. This had never happened on a mission before, but his other missions hadn't had fathomless brown eyes that could see straight to his soul. He was pretty sure an apology had been on the list. *Never a bad place to start.*

"I'm sorry I doubted you. I should have tracked you down long before now."

Emmie said nothing, looking down and focusing intently on undoing the buttons of her coat.

“I had this idea, stupid really, that I’d serve my country as some kind of noble sacrifice for you. I don’t regret my time in the marines, but I see now that I could have grown into the man I wanted to be with you by my side, too.”

She tossed her coat onto the armchair, revealing a cranberry cowl neck cashmere sweater that his fingers itched to stroke. He clenched his fingers hard into fists to curb the impulse. He had to get this out before all of the blood rushed to his dick, leaving his big brain useless.

“You need to know, it was all for you. It’s always been you.”

Was she pulling the hem of her sweater higher up her torso? He dropped to his knees, felled by anticipation. *Better finish this quick.*

“There has been no one else but you.”

Her hands hitched. He noticed the subtle motion, because he hadn’t taken his eyes off their steady movement towards her shoulders.

“Say that again while you’re looking me in the eye.” He snapped his gaze to hers. Doubt and disbelief chased each other across her face. He rose and stepped to her, his hands sliding along the skin she’d left revealed just above the crest of her hips. He needed to touch her while he bared his soul.

“I haven’t been with anyone since you. I dated a bit, but no one held a candle to you. I’ve been waiting for this day for a long time.”

“I don’t... I didn’t...” Her words stuttered through her shock, and he cut off her response with a gentle finger against her lips.

“Shh. It’s OK. I saw the pictures, and knowing what I know now, you thought I was a complete bastard. I get it.” Emmie opened her mouth and sucked his fingertip inside with a quiet moan. His blood was pumping so fiercely that he missed what she said through the roaring in his ears.

“What?”

“I said, I didn’t sleep with anyone else either. The dates were political set-ups. My heart belonged to you.”



EMMELINE LOST herself in his demanding kisses and found the piece of her heart she’d been missing. At the time she’d been beyond frustrated that no one else’s kisses could arouse this kind of response, but now she understood. It wasn’t the technique that made a kiss spectacular. It was her desire for the kisser.

Nothing else had felt right because no one else had been him. Despite the lost time, his kisses still had the power to shut down her brain and set her body aflame. She’d missed the inferno.

Em pulled back from the kiss long enough to finish wrestling her sweater over her head and get his started as well. He took the hint and shed layers with a much-appreciated alacrity. Gliding her hands over his now bare torso, Emmeline was reminded that he was not the college boy she knew. The boy she’d given her virginity to that long ago summer hadn’t had these chiseled abs or broad shoulders. She explored every new muscle and sinew, wondering what else had changed. She continued her upward progress, sliding her fingers up his neck and over the prickly shorn hair at his nape. Tears prickled again of the loss of his curls.

“What’s wrong?” He’d been remarkably patient, letting her learn his body anew, watching her watching him. Of course he noticed her tears.

“Your hair. It’s silly to cry over, but I miss it. Those curls were mine. I loved running my fingers through them, knowing I was the only one with that privilege.”

“I remember.”

“Without them, you seem so different.” It was a concrete reminder that he’d lived ten years of life that had changed him in ways she couldn’t begin to fathom.

“I can grow it back.”

“No. We can’t go back to who we were. It wouldn’t fit who you’ve become.”

“Maybe not, but it might fit the man I’ll become back by your side.”

She kissed him then. She had to shut him up before his sweet nothings pushed the tears in her eyes down her cheeks.

She didn’t want to think of the future or all the obstacles that stood in their way. They were different people who wanted different things. A shared future was unlikely, but she pushed the sadness aside. She’d waited so long to be in his arms again. She wasn’t going to ruin it with reality.

His hands finally touched her skin, sliding behind her to trace her spine and unhook her bra. He cupped her breasts, and she moaned at the rightness of it all. Stroking, squeezing, gentle tugs. His hands turned her inside out, his rough fingers exploring her reactions. She felt an instant of self-consciousness. She’d been much smaller, much thinner, when he’d last seen her. She was healthier now, but she couldn’t help but wonder if he’d notice.

“Emmie, you were stunning at eighteen. But now...You blow me away.” The reverence in his gaze warmed her, and the intent exploration of his hands burned away any doubts.

She was nearly mindless with desire when he lowered his lips to her breasts. Every lick, every nip sent spirals of desire straight to her core. As if no time had passed, he played with her in all of her favorite ways. It had never occurred to her that they were her favorites because she’d discovered them with him. What if she never found this kind of connection again? She would take her pleasure with him while she could, and not count the cost. Her passion was building at an alarming rate, and she wanted nothing more than to let go. But she wanted to let go with him.

“Michael?”

“Yes, Emmie?”

“I need you.” She squirmed against him, trying to pull him

closer, but he resisted. Her gym-toned physique was no match for his earned in combat.

“I need you too, baby. God, I’ve missed you.”

“No, Michael. I *need* you. Now. I’m getting too close, and I refuse to come without you.”

That bold pronouncement earned her the flurry of action she’d hoped for. He toppled her back on the waiting bed and divested them both of all remaining clothing in record time. She was helpless to do more than watch, lost in the haze of heat he’d created, needing him to hurry. He sheathed himself with latex and took a moment to observe her, naked and sprawled on his bed. The hunger and satisfaction in his eyes turned her on even more. When she saw his gaze focus intently lower, she remembered his favorite thing and shook her head.

“Next time. I’m too close.” As much as she loved it when he went down on her, she didn’t think she could handle it right now. Even knowing that he wanted to and remembering that exquisite pleasure was pushing her too close to her personal edge, and she wanted him to fall with her.

She reached for him, pulling his fine form down on top of her, craving his control. His eyes gleamed intently, never leaving hers, as he held himself poised above her.

“Next time, huh? I’m going to hold you to that.”

“You can hold me to whatever part you like. Just don’t stop.”

CHAPTER 7



Every teasing thought fled from his head the moment he sank into her warm willing flesh.

Home.

The feeling was so visceral; he had trouble convincing his hips to withdraw. He never wanted to leave her again. Only the promise of greater pleasure got his ass in gear. He was too far-gone for finesse. Ten years of self-service had left him ready to blow, but judging by her wild responses, so was his Emmie.

His Emmie. God, that sounded good. He'd do anything in his power to make that the truth, especially if that included reminding her of their magic in bed on a regular basis. With every thrust he was affirming how amazing this connection was. He needed her to believe that this was enough. That they could start from this and build a new relationship on an old stable foundation. That the glory of this was worth any risk.

His hips sped up of their own accord, hurtling them both into bliss. Feeling her squeeze around him molded the pieces of his heart back together where they belonged. Joining her in the rush to the peak, he collapsed, spent, on top of her, needing to keep her close while he recovered. He was going to hold her to her

promise of next time with every ounce of his body. He was going to hope for a second chance with every beat of his heart.



SHE CAME BACK into herself pinned to the bed by two hundred and fifty pounds of gorgeous male. Shallow breathing didn't seem to be a bad trade-off for the security of his weight prolonging her afterglow. Maybe if she stayed real still, she could stay there forever, safe and sated. Maybe she could keep ignoring the reality waiting to douse her with cold water. Maybe...

Then he rolled to the side, pulling away and popping her enchanted bubble of hope.

"You are still amazing, Emmie-mine. I'll have to rest up before Round Two."

The old endearment sent dueling impulses of warmth and chagrin through her heart. She'd loved being called that. He was the only one who'd dared, and she had so desperately wanted to be his. But it reminded her that she was no longer that young girl. She was a woman with goals and plans and responsibilities. She couldn't just pick up and jaunt around the world with his deployments. And she wouldn't ask him to give up his dreams either.

"No one has called me that in a very long time."

"Because you've always been mine."

"Michael, we have to talk." She rolled away from him and sat up, needing to marshal her reserves. He sat as well and hunched his shoulders over his knees, as if he could shield his heart from her words. She pushed on.

"This was wonderful, better than I remembered, but we've got to think this through. A tumble for old-times' sake is one thing." Angry eyes flashed to hers, calling out her lie. But she was stronger now and would not let his anger sway her from her

message. “A long-distance relationship after a ten-year separation is another. I just don’t see how this can work.”

He rose from the bed and walked into the bathroom without a word.

“Well, that went well,” Emmeline muttered. She composed her trademark veneer and calmly began dressing. She’d managed everything but her sweater and coat when Michael re-emerged wearing boxer briefs and a smirk. He looked hotter than any man who’d just been blown off deserved. She was ashamed to say it took several moments before she realized he was toying with an envelope in his hands.

He tossed it on the bed next to her.

“What’s your rush if we only have today? You promised me a next time. I think you should read that before I collect.”

Emmeline fingered the cream-colored square uncertainly, trying to read him and failing. Was he angry? Sad? Resigned? Or did he really find her announcement amusing? This new reserve was unsettling. In the old days, she’d seldom had trouble discerning his true emotions. He sat next to her on the bed, his near-nakedness making her regret her decision to get dressed. He leaned back cockily on his elbows, fully aware of where her attention landed when he did so.

“Go ahead. Read it. You said you didn’t get it the first time I left it.”

“Does this mean you’re leaving?” The thought hit her hard, air squeaking past the cement brick suddenly sitting on her solar plexus. She hated that she wanted him to stay almost as much as she hated him for wanting to go.

There’s no future here. You can’t live on stolen moments, no matter how satisfying they may be. You have responsibilities, and so does he.

“Read it.” He cut through her mental pep talk with a low voice that shattered her resolve.

With trembling hands, she tore open the card. It took a full minute for her to blink away the blurry words and focus.

1/2/18

DEAR EMMIE,

I won't say that the years apart have been wasted. We've both grown and changed in ways that have enriched our lives. We are no longer two young kids in the throes of their first love. We are adults who know the heartache of loss.

I'd like to see if the adults we've become can fall into a love even deeper than before.

I know you have a crazy schedule for the U.N. I have a few more weeks of service as I transition out of active duty. You know my dream was always to run for office and serve my country at home. I'd always dreamed of changing the world with you by my side.

Will you give us a chance? The promise of us is too strong for me to walk away from. Please, say yes.

*All my love,
Michael*

SHE SAT THERE and let his words wash over her. She read the letter through twice while she struggled with her next move. If she said yes, would she be giving up her chance at making a difference in the world in her own right to be political arm candy once again? If she said no, would she ever find this kind of connection with someone again? Her mind spinning, she latched onto the first detail that swam through the whirlpool slowly enough for her to grab.

"When did you write this?"

"This morning. I had a plan, which has now been blown to bits. I was going to apologize, wine and dine you, apologize some more, maybe beg a few kisses, give you the letter, and ask for a second chance. You've fast forwarded us to the very end."

“Sorry.” The apology came automatically and unbidden.

“Don’t you dare apologize.” Michael tugged her back onto the bed and rolled to face her. “This was amazing, and it only makes me mean what I wrote even more.” That intensity was back in his eyes. It thrilled her, even as she fought his magnetic pull. Logic. Logic would be her savior.

“So you’re leaving the marines?”

“I’ll be free as a bird in a few short weeks. I’m awaiting transfer orders back stateside, so I can process out.”

“And then you’re going to run for office?” Much as she tried, she couldn’t keep the distaste from her voice. She’d been on the campaign trail since before she could walk. She’d seen her mother set aside her own plans and career to be a politician’s wife. She’d spent enough of her youth doing that. Part of becoming a U.N. Goodwill Ambassador stemmed from her desire to use those skills she’d honed for herself and the good of others in need, and to make something of herself separate from her father. She’d had enough of using her talents just to keep her dad in office. Was Michael counting on her political cachet for his run at a seat? She hated to think it, but she’d lived in D.C. for too long to dismiss the little voice in her head shouting to be heard over the thunderous beating of her heart.

“Eventually. All of this has been to further that goal, but I don’t plan to run immediately. I was thinking that someone might need a personal bodyguard during her upcoming world tour. Who better than your very own marine?”

He kissed her still bare shoulder sending a shiver down her spine. Was it from desire or apprehension? She scooted away, trying to keep her perspective a little longer.

“Why me?”

“Why you what?”

“Why do you want me to do all of this with you?” Her suspicion was clear in her voice, this time on purpose. “Is this some political maneuver? Why target my father’s campaign all those

years ago? Why pursue a shy eighteen-year-old me in the first place?" She pushed back up to sitting, her height over him giving her the badly needed illusion of advantage.

"I went to work for your father because I respect his ideals and his longevity. I wanted to learn from the best, and yes, I wanted to make local connections that would help me out later. My goal has always been to make life better for those underserved in my community. Why did I choose you? You made my life shine that summer. You made me want to be better, do more, to deserve you. Do you think I wanted to fall for the Senator's daughter?"

"Excuse me?"

"That was a suicide mission, a one-way ticket out the door. But one look into those big brown eyes, frightened but alive and filled with curiosity, and I was done resisting. You lured me into love, and now you're stuck with me. Why are you so hung up about me running someday?"

"Because I've only just gotten to be me!" Her anger vehemently burst through her words. "I've spent my whole life being someone else, the perfect daughter, the polite hostess, the ice queen. I can't go back to that. I won't!"

"I won't ask you to. All I'm asking for is a chance to see if the new you could fall in love with the new me, too."

"But I don't want to take you from your dreams. If you gave them up for me, I could never forgive myself. Don't put that on me."

He sat up then and took her by the shoulders. The tender kisses he planted on her lips and then her forehead touched the hopeful place in her heart she was struggling to protect.

"Emmie-mine, I think we've both proven that we can adapt to difficult situations. Give us a shot to rebuild our relationship and map out a new plan for the future together. There's no reason being my wife would mean losing yourself. The good you are doing internationally, could you see pursuing that on a more

local level? That has always been my goal. Why can't we pursue that together?"

"Can you honestly say you'd be happy to give up on your dreams of running for office for me?"

"Can you honestly say you'll be happier in the next ten years without me? For a chance at forever, I'm willing to work on a compromise."

No, she couldn't say that. She couldn't say anything, because fear froze her tongue. He filled her silence with his convictions.

"Emmeline, I need you to believe that I've changed. I'm not that hotheaded kid anymore. I've learned that being part of a team doesn't work if I go running off. We act together for the good of the unit and the greater good of the country. I'm not running from us, not now, not ever. I need you in my life, and I'm willing to do the work to make that happen. Are you?"

She stared into those fathomless brown eyes and saw his heart laid bare for her to see. Despite all of their past disasters, she knew she could trust this man with her heart. Hadn't he proven his fidelity? Hadn't he opened the door to compromise? He'd listened to her concerns and offered to work through them together. That was all she'd ever wanted from her parents and never gotten. Slowly, the defenses she'd built around her mind began to crumble under the onslaught of her heart.

Could she really tell her heart no after having had a taste of the man he'd become? No. No, she couldn't. The significance of his midnight kiss on New Year's was not lost on her. He was worth any risk to have for however long he wanted to stay. She hoped she could convince him that forever wouldn't be long enough. It might take a while for her brain to settle into the new normal, but her heart was all in.

He was still waiting patiently for her answer; giving her the space she needed to think but not giving up either. He certainly had changed from the boy she'd loved. She was looking forward to loving the man he'd become.

Holding his eye, she rose from the bed and stood facing him, unsnapping her bra, before sitting in his lap straddling his legs. She was gratified to see she didn't need to wait for him to meet her gaze, despite the temptation she'd planted right under his nose.

"I believe you. And I'm willing to work for us, too. On one condition."

Michael lowered his forehead to her sternum in relief and wrapped his strong arms around her in his special way that had always made her feel cherished.

"Your wish is my command."

"You don't even know what it is."

"I don't have to know. I'd do anything in my power for you. But if you want to tell me, I'm listening."

Em ran her hands up over his nearly shaved head and tipped it back so she could make sure he understood the importance of this demand.

"I changed my mind."

"But..." She covered his mouth with her hand and finished with mock severity.

"You need to grow back your curls." His head dropped back and he laughed, breaking the tension. Teeth shining, smile infectious, he was irresistible. Em pressed a kiss to the side of his neck where his laughter shook against her lips.

"Welcome home, soldier."

