

Chapter One

The first bullet grazed his cheek, followed by searing pain and the acrid smell of singed flesh and gunpowder. “Sniper! Three o’clock!” He shouted to the small band of Marines clustered behind the disabled Humvee. “Stay down.”

Jenkins, a kid from Idaho so green his boots weren’t even scuffed, looked at him with worried eyes. “What’ll we do, Gunny?”

Before he could reply, all hell broke loose. One sniper became six. Pinned down, they waited. And prayed. The whistle of a mortar pierced the roar of a shitload of automatic rifles a split second before Jenkins disappeared in a haze of blood and mangled flesh.

Max Logan jolted awake from the nightmare, a scream lodged in his throat. Heart racing, gasping for air, he threw off the sheet and sat on the side of the bed. The last nightmare happened nearly a year ago. He thought he was over it.

Evidently not.

Control your breathing, lower your heart rate. The shrink’s instructions ran through his mind as he struggled to escape the hellhole that nearly destroyed him.

Recurrent pain in his left leg, compliments of shrapnel from the IED, was another reminder of his brush with death. He pushed off the bed and limped to the window.

Must have been my conversation with Big John today. That’s what stirred up the memories. He pressed his head against the cold glass. Not for the first time, he asked himself why. “Why am I alive, and they’re all dead?”

A sudden light from the kitchen next door ended his introspection and drew his gaze to the woman who paused in the middle of the room, arms straight at her side.

Her name was Skylar Ward, though everyone called her Sky. She worked at the local diner where he took a lot of his meals. Their conversations rarely went beyond did he want the daily special or his usual burger and fries, but something about her piqued his interest. Gut instinct said the awareness was mutual, yet he hesitated to test the waters. He'd come a long way in the last sixteen months but couldn't bring himself to take the next step. Not yet.

A single mom, she had the cutest and smartest little girl who never missed an opportunity to engage Max in conversation at the diner or when they were outside at the same time. Truth be told, the child did most of the talking, usually in the form of a gazillion questions, but he didn't mind. Especially if it meant an opportunity to chat with the mother as well.

He straightened when Sky swiped her cheeks with one hand and dropped into a chair at the small table near the window.

He glanced at the bedside clock, 0430. There were no curtains on the window and the narrow driveway between their houses in this older neighborhood allowed him to see her in sharp detail. She sat drill-sergeant straight, hands clasped together in her lap, auburn hair disheveled, loose-fitting pajamas boasting an animal, maybe a cat, on the front.

It wasn't the first time he'd observed her in the wee hours of the morning. Not that he was a wacked-out Peeping Tom, either. He wasn't. He just had trouble sleeping at times and prone to be up at all hours of the night. Lately, so was she.

Sometimes, she just sat there. Sometimes, she made coffee or did paperwork.

Tonight, though, something was different. She was different.

Rigid as a poplar, she ran slender fingers through shoulder-length hair, then gripped the sides of her head, face contorted as though in agony. She tilted her head back and rolled it side to side. Her chest rose and fell with deep, measured breaths. She crossed her wrists on the table and

sat frozen for the space of a heartbeat before her shoulders slumped, and she lowered her head. Her slender body shook with the force of her sobs.

“I know how you feel, ma’am,” he whispered to the darkness, “I know just how you feel.”

Skylar Ward hated crying. It never solved anything and left her with red, puffy eyes that no amount of makeup would hide. So what if the rent was due, her car hovered one crank away from the scrap heap, and Christmas loomed a month away? That wasn’t reason enough to host a pity party for one. Yet here she sat in the predawn hours blubbering like the world just came to an end. Who knew? Maybe it had, and she didn’t know it yet.

Never one to feel sorry for herself, at least not for long, Sky wondered what sparked this infrequent event. The upcoming holidays? Maybe. But in her heart, she knew it went beyond that, beyond monitoring her young daughter’s health or pinching pennies.

She loved her daughter more than life itself and did not regret the steps she took to ensure her health and happiness. But more and more lately, she missed not having someone to share her life with, to snuggle on the couch and talk about anything or nothing. She was so tired of watching life from the sidelines, doing everything, facing everything alone, with no one to watch her back or hold her close in the darkness.

“Suck it up, buttercup,” she mumbled when the waterworks ceased. “It’s not like you have a lot of options.” She got up from the table and splashed her face with cold water. A quick glance at the wall clock produced another groan. No point in going back to bed now. She started the coffee maker, then leaned against the counter, arms braced on either side. Surrounded by a

sense of imminent doom and a loneliness so profound it bordered on physical pain, she sucked in a ragged breath.

I've been alone practically my whole life, why is it bothering me now?

Her father died when she was young. Her mother was a physical therapist, and they lived in a modest yet comfortable home. A drunk driver turned her once vibrant, happy mother into an invalid a week after Sky turned sixteen. The only relative was a grandmother whom she hadn't seen since her father died, so Sky left her carefree life behind and became her mother's caretaker, working after school and on weekends at a local pharmacy to make ends meet. Despite the burdens she shouldered, she managed to graduate from high school and then enroll in nursing school.

Memories of those dark days threatened to initiate another round of self-pity, and she gave herself a mental shake.

Deal with the problem at hand – how to pay the rent this month – and save the rest for another day. Mr. Jenkins was a kind-hearted older gentleman, but kindness only went so far when money was involved.

A tingling on the back of her neck pulled her to the window where only darkness and the house next door loomed. The occupant, Max Logan, had moved in about six months ago and was a frequent customer at the diner where she worked. Maddie had more conversations with him than Sky, and when they did talk, it rarely went beyond casual conversation. His demeanor, heightened by tips that exceeded the norm and covert looks cast her way, indicated more than casual interest. Sadly, as a single mother barely making ends meet, she focused on getting through the next crisis, which left no room for a personal life, no matter how badly she wanted one.

Max was the only man she'd met in Bakersville to even halfway draw her attention, and she briefly considered encouraging him. The few men who had expressed interest up to now quickly cooled when they discovered she had a child. Max, however, didn't seem to mind. He would patiently answer Maddie's multitude of questions and occasionally encouraged more. He appeared to enjoy their interactions, which provided Sky an opportunity to get to know him better.

Her best friend and neighbor, Gail Brown, said Max was a former soldier. She didn't need that last piece of information since everything about his bearing screamed military.

She guessed him to be a little older than her thirty-three years. Tall, maybe six-three or four, his well-muscled body moved with an easy grace, despite a slight limp. He wore his dark chestnut hair in the traditional buzz cut favored by soldiers, and heavy brows rested above unsmiling, coffee-colored eyes. His features were hard, chiseled like an unfinished sculpture, and he possessed an air of authority that commanded attention.

The beep of the coffee pot brought her back to the counter, where she filled a mug and, with only a brief hesitation, scooted a chair near the window and sat down, calling herself a pathetic fool for pretending she wasn't alone.