



To Seduce a SEAL (Sin City SEALs 3)

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Description: Chrissie Tate refuses to be a one-hit wonder. If she's going to take care of her family, she can't let herself get distracted—especially not by the hot as hell Navy SEAL hired to be her bodyguard. But when a crazed fan attacks, she changes her tune. She'll keep Dante around...if he agrees to teach her self-defense.

Except their close-contact lessons quickly become steamy bedroom sessions. And it's up to this Navy SEAL to save Chrissie's career—and his heart—before their explosive passion consumes them both...

Total Pages (Source): 62

Page 1

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:09 am

Chapter One

I saved the hostage.

Dante Raske clung to that thought as he pushed past the lingering pain in his knee. Three months since he'd rushed in and, working alongside one of the best SEAL teams in the U.S. Navy, brought a kidnapped aid worker home in one piece. They'd been outnumbered, but he'd made damn sure they weren't overpowered. And tore his ACL in the process.

But one surgery, and a few months on the sidelines, was a small price to pay for a woman's life.

"Is your knee bothering you or are you just taking in the scenery?" Ronan asked as he jogged back to Dante's side.

Kiss my ass.

But he had enough sense not to say those words to the Navy SEAL officer who outranked Dante's enlisted butt. Ronan wouldn't pull rank in this desert. Still, Dante stuck to his new mantra: "It's fine."

Ronan, the redheaded SEAL who'd maintained his Scottish accent despite being born and raised in the USA, slowed his eight-minute mile jogging pace and matched Dante's brisk walk.

"You're still grounded for how long?" Ronan said, his tone so damn understanding

Dante wanted to put his fist through something. “Two weeks until the docs will even consider clearing you for active duty?”

“Yeah.” He grunted, pushing through the pain.

“It was a bad tear, man. If you need more time to rest—”

“One more day at home, sitting on my ass watching my knee heal, and boredom will bury me six feet under,” Dante muttered as he pulled a bandana from his cargo shorts and wiped his brow.

Ronan stopped and turned to him, his hands on his hips. “Look, I know babysitting a country singer doesn’t come close to a real mission. Even if you’re only at fifty percent I’d rather work with you than most of the clowns her manager could scare up. But this gig...”

“It’s important,” Dante said. “I get it.”

He knew Ronan needed the extra cash. And Dante wasn’t going to turn up his nose at the money the singer’s manager was offering for one weekend of work protecting a twenty-something starlet with a few too many adoring fans.

“It’s not just about the money,” Ronan said. After busting their asses together all over the freaking globe, Dante’s teammate could read his mind. “I served with the star’s brother before I joined the teams. It’s important we do this right.”

“I thought you barely knew the guy,” Dante said. His knee hurt, but that didn’t prevent him from giving Ronan a hard time.

“We went our separate ways. But you know how it is after you spend a long deployment with someone.”

“Yeah,” Dante said. “But I think this has more to do with your girl, Casey, being the lead singer for the opening act.”

Ronan smiled. “I don’t mind making a little extra money while working alongside my girlfriend. That doesn’t happen often.”

Dante shook his head. Their teammate Jack had thrust Casey, a down-on-her-luck singer, into Ronan’s lap one night at Bottom’s Up, the bar near their base in Coronado. Jack had been too busy trying to win over the bartender to have eyes for anyone else. And Ronan? Well hell, his teammate always gave 100 percent to his relationships. No one-night stands. He opened his heart to the woman in his bed from day one. The crazy son-of-a-bitch. Didn’t he realize that their

line of work was like a ticking time bomb for relationships?

“Just because I want to be here, doesn’t mean you need to stay,” Ronan added. “I don’t want you to reinjure that knee. We need you out there, man. I can keep an eye on Chrissie, in her brother’s memory and all, while you rest up in sunny California.”

“I’m fine,” Dante repeated. And compared to Chrissie’s brother, the sailor who’d lost his life while serving overseas, Dante didn’t have one goddamn reason to complain.

Sure, his family worried about his knee. His mother had flown out for the surgery. And she’d stayed for three long weeks, cooking up a storm in his cramped one-bedroom apartment. Finally, after she’d packed his freezer full of lasagna, he’d sent her back to Brooklyn.

But fussing over him while he recovered was a helluva lot different than mourning him.

“You sure? You don’t look fine,” Ronan said.

Dante grunted. "I can stand around and be the hired muscle, no problem."

Ronan nodded. "Good. I'm going to pick up the pace." He turned and jogged backward for a few steps. "I'm not going to break a sweat walking through this canyon. Meet you back at the truck?"

Page 2

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:09 am

“Fuck off,” Dante said, shoving the bandana he’d used to wipe his brow back into his pocket.

“Watch your language, man.” Ronan turned and headed down the trail. “According to my girl, Chrissie is as sweet and innocent as they come.”

“Of course she is,” Dante murmured, attempting a slow and steady jog as Ronan disappeared around a bend in the trail. “Of all the country starlets, I get saddled with the Disney princess.”

Dante made it to a section of the trail not far from the parking area before he slowed to a walk. His leg ached from hitting the hotel gym before the sun rose this morning. He glanced down at the red scar on his right knee. The surgeon had promised it would fade with time. But Dante didn’t give a damn about the scar that disappeared when he put on his cargo shorts. He needed his knee working at 110 percent. Perfect wouldn’t cut it. Not for his line of work. SEALs had to be the best.

And until I can prove that I’m mission-ready, I’m stuck here.

He paused on the trail and took a drink from his water bottle. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted a couple near the wall of red rock that rose up like a mountain in the desert. His hand holding the water bottle froze in mid-air.

The woman wore a black wig that looked like it had been stolen from the Addams family set. But despite her Morticia hairdo, she possessed a body that up until a few months ago, he would have risked damn near anything to explore. Her sports bra hugged breasts that would easily fill his hands. And her abs...another time and

another place, he'd push aside his determination to steer clear of Vegas flings for a chance to run his tongue over her taut stomach—and back up to her chest.

His mouth. That body. He could have a field day. But...

I didn't come to Vegas for the breasts.

Dante lowered the water bottle, his gaze still fixed on the couple who hadn't glanced in his direction. The man stood just out of arm's reach, and for a second Dante swore the guy was trying to execute some sort of dance move.

Maybe all the exotic dancers in Sin City bring their one-night stands here...

Dante closed his eyes. A few months earlier, he'd visited Vegas for his teammate's wedding. He'd been ready to leave the memory of his cheating ex-wife behind him. And he'd fallen into bed with an erotic dancer who faked an orgasm onstage in her underwear eight times a week. The show was sexy as hell, and so was Summer when she'd driven him out to the canyon and pushed him up against those rocks...

Shit, Summer had been a lesson in how not to rebound from a broken marriage. Sure, he wanted to get laid. But he also wanted to take a page from Ronan's playbook and hand over his heart to the woman in his bed. He wished to give the woman in his life 100 percent loyalty and love, the same way he gave his country his all when he was out there working alongside his team. And yeah, maybe that made him a bigger pansy-ass than his busted knee.

Dante opened his eyes and glanced down at his scar again. Right now, healing was the only thing he needed to focus on. And not dying of boredom in the process.

He shook his head and lifted his gaze to the desert path.

“Ahh!” came a scream. A woman’s scream. From the direction of that couple.

He froze for a second and then zeroed in on the rock wall. Months ago, he’d heard Summer cry out with pleasure while pressed against those rocks, and it sure as shit didn’t sound like that.

He broke into a run. His gaze remained on the woman in the black wig. He picked up the pace as the shirtless asshole crushed his hips against the woman he’d tossed up against the rock. The bastard had pinned her arms overhead, rendering her close to helpless.

Pain rushed through Dante’s leg, but he ignored it. As he drew closer, he scanned the woman, only this time he wasn’t checking out her body. He was trying to determine the best way to pull the man in the cowboy hat off her without causing further injury.

Five more steps.

His knee begged for mercy.

Later. I can’t stop. I saved the hostage. And now I’m going to rescue the girl in the Morticia Addams wig.

Chapter Two

You’re fired.

As soon as she could breathe, Chrissie planned to kick Jared, the backup singer masquerading as a cowboy, out of the music video. Or maybe she’d wait until after the shoot. They couldn’t afford the time it would take to find another backup singer...

But I might never say those words. I might never inhale oxygen again.

Her backup singer's mouth claimed hers and erased any hope of regaining her breath. And his hips thrust against her as if he was doing everything in his power to prove he could ruin her music video. She tried to claw her way free from the train-wreck of a kiss. But Jared had finally decided to commit to his role.

If only you'd bothered to learn the choreography, you would know we're not shooting a domestic violence PSA.

She fought harder as black dots clouded her vision. One last push and...

She was clawing at the air. The weight of Jared's body had disappeared. She could breathe. She could move.

Page 3

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:09 am

Chrissie opened her eyes, still gulping for precious air.

Crunch!

Her jaw dropped as she watched a man twice Jared's size punch her backup singer.

Or former backup singer. He was still fired.

After the video shoot.

The tall, dark-haired wall of muscle drove his other fist into Jared's gut, and the smaller man crumbled like a wannabe cowboy who'd wandered into the corral and picked a fight with the real deal. Her backup singer doubled over and dropped to his knees at the larger man's feet.

Or maybe her savior was a body builder with a hero complex.

She turned her attention to the man who'd rushed in to save the day. Oh, he had muscles all right. But she suspected he didn't spend all of his time in the gym.

"Stay down." Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome growled.

Jared whimpered and looked as if he might cry.

The man who'd rushed in and rescued her turned to her. His expression softened as his deep brown eyes scanned her from head to toe. A lock of his wavy, dark hair fell over his forehead.

Her hero looked as if he'd stolen Patrick Dempsey's hair and Channing Tatum's muscles. And to her impromptu rescue she was wearing a witch's wig that had been on clearance at the Halloween store.

But without the ugly wig, someone might recognize her, and she'd be stuck signing autographs instead of rehearsing.

"Are you all right, ma'am?" he asked.

"Fine." She gasped, still fighting to regain her equilibrium.

His brow furrowed as he reached into one of the many pockets lining his shorts. He withdrew a cell phone. "Would you like me to call the police?"

"No," she said quickly. "Really, I'm fine."

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His concern deepened as if the word "fine" meant something altogether different to him.

She offered him her best smile, the one that won over audiences night after night.

"I saw what happened," he said. "I can give a statement. It won't be your boyfriend's word against yours."

"Chris—" Jared started.

"He's not my boyfriend," Chrissie said, cutting Jared off before he could reveal her identity to the stranger. "We're backup singers. Both of us. We're shooting a music video out here later today. And we wanted to get in some practice." She forced a fake

laugh. “Clearly, we need it.”

The man with the movie star muscles took a step back. “Music video?”

“Uh-huh. The song is about lust, love, and well...” She bit her lower lip and glanced at her feet. “Sex. It’s a country song.”

He crossed his arms in front of his chest, drawing attention to his biceps.

One touch. Just one.

But she fought the temptation. She needed the handsome stranger to continue with his hike through the canyons before he recognized her. Or decided to call the cops despite her protests.

“I don’t know much about country music,” he said.

Shoot! I should have said hip-hop.

Page 4

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:09 am

But he would have seen right through that excuse. She didn't exactly look like she could compete in Beyoncé's market. She had a much better shot at winning over the hearts—and wallets—of the fans who'd listened to Taylor Swift before she'd started shaking it off.

“But I thought it was about pickups, dogs, and honoring fallen soldiers,” he continued. “Like the girl who wrote that song about her brother.”

That's me.

She'd written the mournful ballad the day someone from the Navy arrived at their trailer in Central Florida and handed her parents a folded flag and a thank-you for your son's service. Her lyrics had hit a nerve and propelled her to fame. But if she wanted to keep her place in the spotlight—and the paychecks that supported her parents and siblings—her label wanted a fun song. And they'd demanded a sexy music video shot in Las Vegas's Red Rock Canyon to go with it.

With a backup singer who'd probably fit in better on a Taylor Swift tour wearing sequins instead of a Stetson.

But she didn't have the time or money to waste on finding the perfect cowboy for her shoot. By eight o'clock tonight, she needed to be ready to walk onstage for the second performance of her Vegas tour stop.

“Some of country music is about those things,” she conceded.

“And maybe tractors,” he added. “But not the other stuff.”

She pressed her lips together. Mr. Tall, Dark, and Handsome was right. He didn't know a thing about country music.

"Country comes from the heart," she said. "Sure, maybe there are a few cowboys out there who sing about their favorite tractor. And I bet their heart is in it. But my—"

He cocked his head and studied her.

"My singer, the one I work for," she continued, stumbling over the words. "His songs are about love and loss and..."

"Sex?" he said dryly.

She nodded and then looked past him to Jared. "Let's try that again. We want to get it right—"

"He's not going to try anything again." Her mystery man stepped in front of Jared.

"Look," she said, no longer bothering with her fake smile. "I need to nail this music video. It might seem silly to you, but this is my job. So unless you know how to stage a make-out scene against a rock, I'll have to ask you to move on and let us work."

"I don't know about staging." His arms moved to his sides as if he were preparing to pounce. His dark eyes met hers. "But I've had some experience kissing against this wall of rock."

Then kiss me.

Her lips parted as if she'd said those words out loud. She wouldn't ask the man who looked like he'd walked out of her fantasies for a kiss. It was tempting... But she never gave in to desire. She'd fought the lure of the doughnuts on the catering table

for the past year.

But his kiss might be better than a chocolate doughnut.

Still...she didn't have a lot of experience with alpha males or kisses. She'd gone from helping her family make ends meet by working as a cashier, to a twenty-three-year-old country star. And she'd been too focused on her music during her grocery store checkout days to pay much attention to boys.

"And honey," the mystery man continued, his voice a low growl. "I know how to seduce a woman, how to kiss her until she's breathless. Without knocking the wind out of her."

Temptation, here I come!

"If you're such an expert," she shot back before her common sense locked the impulsive desire behind a door labeled "do not open." "Then show me."

...

Dante had thought he'd hit rock bottom in the weeks following his surgery. His SEAL team had left California for a training exercise. His ex-wife had remarried, promising to love and cherish his former plumber. And his Italian mother had invaded his home. He'd never felt so damn useless.

Until he'd rushed over to rescue the freaking backup singer who didn't need saving. Shit, the only thing the spitfire in the butt-ugly wig needed was a man who knew how to kiss.

And I sure as hell didn't lose that skill when I tore up my knee.

He could do this. Whether he should...that was another question. And one he didn't want to contemplate right now. He'd rather focus on his self-assigned mission—kiss the woman in the weird wig.

Dante took a step forward and watched as her lips parted. She pressed her palms against the red rock and arched her back. His gaze dropped to her chest. Those breasts—hell, she put every dancer in Vegas to shame.

Page 5

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:09 am

He closed the space between them and placed his hands on her shoulders. Keeping his touch featherlight, he ran his palms down her arms. He reached her hands and intertwined his fingers with hers. Slowly, he drew her arms up and pinned her hands over her head.

She stared up at him, her blue eyes wide with wonder. She looked so damn innocent. His gaze skimmed over her mouth, down her neck, to the swells visible above her sports bra.

“Show me more,” she murmured.

He was tempted. His hard-on pressed against his shorts.

“Your hands stay here,” he ordered. “Understood?”

She nodded.

He released her and ran his palms down her arms. So damn soft. He reached her shoulders and headed south, allowing his fingers to roam her curves. His thumbs skimmed the sides of her breasts as his palms slid down her sides. When he came to her slim, yet firm, thighs, he drew her legs up until he was nestled between her limbs.

Hooyah. His dick hadn’t been this happy in months. And yeah, tempting didn’t begin to cover what he felt, what he wanted. But...

This was insane. This wasn’t a mission. And he didn’t know this woman. Hell, she could be playing some twisted game with him. He’d kiss her and the next thing he

knew, her boyfriend would jump him from behind.

He released her and stepped back. He glanced over his shoulder at the shirtless man still kneeling in the dust and...

What the hell? Staring at his ass?

Dante didn't know what to believe. The story about the country music video—shot in Vegas of all places—seemed like a bold-faced lie. Sure, he was in town to meet up with a country starlet. But as far as he knew, she wasn't shooting a video like the dude who sang about love and sex.

Logic told him to walk away. And yeah, another part of him tried to redirect his thinking and kiss the girl. Maybe he'd knock her crazy wig off in the process and see her true hair color.

Or maybe he'd let passion lead him into another crash and burn. One failed marriage and a series of meaningless flings proved there were two organs he couldn't trust when it came to women—his heart and his dick.

He released her hands and stepped back. "That should help you with your video shoot."

She nodded. "It's a start. But—"

"I need to head out," he cut in before she asked for a kiss and his erection vetoed his common sense. "I'm meeting someone. But before I go, I'd like to walk you back to your car."

"You're sweet." She wrapped her arms around her bare stomach. It was strange, but he swore she looked more shaken by his touch, and the way he hadn't kissed her, than

the man who'd slammed her into a freaking canyon wall.

"Not sweet," he said. "But I know that if a woman is about to pass out while I'm kissing her, I'm doing something that should land me in a jail cell." He shot another hard look at the man on the ground. He was 95 percent certain the other man wouldn't hurt her. But still, he wasn't willing to risk her safety. "If you won't let me call the police, I'll have to insist on escorting you to your car."

"But Jared isn't going to hurt me," she continued. "And we really do need to rehearse."

"Not here," he said firmly. "I'm sorry, but I don't feel comfortable leaving you alone with him."

"Please, Ms. Ta—"

"Fine," she said, cutting the other man off. "We'll go."

She picked up a red hiking backpack and stormed away to the parking area, calling over her shoulder. "Come on, Jared. Thanks to your performance, you just might get a nap in before the hair and makeup call."

The shirtless man scrambled to his feet and followed the woman whose backside rivaled her front. Dante stared, memorizing the way her jeans hugged her ass. Her body reminded him of Britney Spears. Not that he'd ever listened to her music. But his kid sister had put up a poster in her room of the blond pop star in a schoolgirl's outfit.

The woman wearing the wig was older than the classic teenage Britney. Probably in her twenties. But hell, he'd love to see her trade in her jeans for that skirt. Toss in a pair of thigh-high stockings...

Fuck me.

Dante turned away. Yeah, he'd reached a new low, all right. He should be focused on his knee, not some strange chick who wore a wig to a damn canyon.

He glanced over his shoulder and watched as the bl

ack hair disappeared into a blue car that looked nothing like a rental. His jaw tightened. He had a bad feeling she hadn't been telling him the whole truth and nothing but the truth. But at least she'd climbed into the car alone. The guy she claimed to be working with headed for a nondescript white sedan. And yeah, that one screamed rental.

Page 6

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:09 am

He started walking down the path and then picked up the pace. He pushed past the pain. At least the aching sensations gave him something to focus on beyond the fact that he still wanted to kiss the woman, even though he was fairly certain she was a crazy liar.

Like my ex-wife in a wig.

Except his ex had wanted the plumber all to herself. She'd never tried to involve Dante in her sex games with the man he'd hired to fix the pipes while he was out ridding the world of terrorists.

"What did you do?" Ronan called as he ran up to Dante's side and slowed his pace. "Walk in circles? You're about where I left you."

"I stopped to take a phone call," Dante lied. There was no way he was telling his teammate that he'd tried to rescue a damsel who wasn't exactly in distress. Though she had been fighting for breath. But maybe that was how she got her kicks.

"Your mom?" Ronan asked. "Is she still worried about you? You know if she wants to come out and share the hotel suite, I wouldn't object to a homemade lasagna."

Aw hell, could this day get any worse?

"We're not inviting my mom to Vegas." Dante turned and headed for the parking area. His knee, and his pride, had taken enough abuse for one morning. At this point, the only thing keeping him going was the fantasy of what it would have been like to press that singer's lips against his.

Chapter Three

Dante stepped into the hotel's hospitality suite...and his day spiraled into clusterfuck territory. Sure, the men in suits appeared unarmed. And yeah, boxes of pastries and doughnuts lined the folding table in the corner, filling the room with an intoxicating scent that beat his usual doom-and-gloom scenario. But the woman he'd "saved" this morning stood in the center of the room.

She'd ditched the long black wig. And an I Heart Nashville T-shirt now covered her sports bra. Still, he'd memorized her curves earlier. Now, he had a pretty good guess which music video the backup singer was shooting.

"His" video my ass. I knew she was lying.

The woman he'd attempted to rescue didn't work for some cowboy who sang love songs. She worked for Chrissie Tate. Hell, she probably knew Casey, Ronan's girlfriend.

"Ms. Tate." A man in a three-piece suit that seemed at odds with his shoulder-length hair stood and headed for the center of the room. "I'd like to introduce you to the soldiers who have offered their leave from the army—"

"We're with the Navy, sir," Ronan cut in. "The SEAL teams."

Out of the corner of his eye, Dante saw eyes widening. A young lady wearing a hotel uniform just about dropped the pastries she was unloading.

"Of course," the suit said as he stopped beside the woman Dante had almost kissed in the canyon. "These Navy SEALs will be keeping an eye on you while we're in Vegas."

Dante's gaze narrowed. He studied the blonde who'd flat-out lied to him this morning. She didn't work for a country star. She was the freaking star! Miss Chrissie Tate, America's current country sweetheart.

"It's nice to meet you gentlemen," she said with a cursory nod in their direction.

Look at me dammit!

"But I don't need bodyguards. I've been careful to wear different wigs when I go out. It's not like I'm a Kardashian. No one's recognized me so far."

"Ms. Tate," the suit said carefully. "You found a fan in your trailer in Phoenix."

"One crazed fan," she said firmly. "Plus the venue here is providing security. On their dime. Not ours."

The suit shook his head. "Your safety comes first. I'll rework the budget, but we both know you can afford a little added muscle. And these soldiers—"

"They're sailors, Mason," the starlet said. "And what kind of manager are you? You're supposed to help me make money, not spend it all."

"Ms. Tate," Ronan said, stepping forward. "I served with your brother. And I can't think of a better way to honor his memory than to keep you safe, ma'am."

Her tough-as-nails expression vanished as she turned to Dante's redheaded teammate. "You knew Joe?"

"Not well. And I wasn't with him on his last deployment. I'd joined the SEAL teams by then. But I know he'd want me to look out for his little sister." He held out his hand. "I'm Ronan."

“Nice to meet you,” she said. “I still don’t think I need two Navy SEALs to watch over me. But you’re welcome to stay for tonight’s show.”

“How about you let us do our job, Ms. Tate,” Ronan said.

Page 7

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:09 am

“Call me Chrissie, please,” she murmured.

“We won’t be in your way.”

“Yes, but—”

“Dante Raske, my teammate here, is still recovering from an injury he received while saving a hostage from the bad guys. If you don’t let him work for you, he’s probably going to die of boredom waiting for his knee to heal.”

Ah hell, make her think I’m half a SEAL why don’t you?

Dante assumed a parade rest position, his hands behind his back and his gaze on a point behind the starlet’s head. Just this morning, he’d been tempted to kiss her. He’d walked out of the canyon still fantasizing about her in a sinfully short skirt.

And now he had to work for her.

“You’re injured?” She turned to him and placed her hands on her hips. “And you were still able to—”

Lift you up, wrap your legs around my waist, and thrust my rock-hard dick against you.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said before she revealed to the room filled with suits on her payroll—not to mention Ronan—that he’d beat up her backup singer. Although she might have been lying about that guy’s identity, too.

Why the hell was he always attracted to women who spun the truth to suit themselves?

Her blue eyes remained locked with his. He swore he saw a hint of admiration. But damn if it wasn't riding on the back of the same primal interest he'd felt when he'd pressed her up against the rock. He knew what it looked like, because it mirrored his desire to finish what they'd started in the canyon.

But she wasn't the backup singer. She was the star he needed to protect. And even if she wasn't his boss, he was done playing fast and loose with his heart. He didn't need a Vegas fling with a side of complications.

"I'll give you one night," she said. "But in the morning, I think we'll all agree that I don't need around-the-clock bodyguards."

Without another glance in his direction, Ms. Chrissie Tate pushed through the door that separated the greenroom from the casino.

"Ma'am," Dante said, moving to follow her.

"Quick trip to the ladies'." She waved them off. "You don't need to follow me there, do you?"

The door slammed behind her.

Dante shook his head. "Yeah, actually we do."

"Give her some space," Ronan said. "Until she's comfortable with having us watch her six." His teammate glanced at the suits. "Watch her back," he clarified for the businessmen.

Dante nodded. He planned on keeping his distance. Even though he had a list of reasons to steer clear of complications, he still wanted to claim that kiss.

But that was why he'd been hired to protect her. He'd bet half her fans took one look at the All-American country star with a body that would make most Vegas strippers weep with envy, and those fans wanted a piece of her, too.

Not on my watch.

This time, he would keep the girl safe without landing himself on the sidelines.

...

"This is all your fault, Mr. SEAL."

Chrissie placed her hands on her hips and waited for the overqualified bod

ygard—whom she didn't want or need—to respond. Sarcasm, anger, maybe a smile, she'd take any response that offered a hint of emotion. She'd been waiting for a few choice words about her deception this morning since he followed her to the ladies' room earlier.

So far he'd been professional. Period.

And he appeared determined to stick to the employer/employee routine. Her bodyguard scanned the music video set as if programmed on autopilot. Observe the surroundings. Calculate the risk factors. Eliminate danger. And repeat.

Page 8

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:09 am

She doubted that he'd found a threat. The only person he seemed likely to attack, Jared, the backup singer who was supposed to be out here suffering under the afternoon desert sun, had called in sick.

"Jared bailed because of you," she continued. "And now, Mr. SEAL, I'm paying a crew to stand around."

"Dante," he said, his gaze landing on her for a brief second before returning to the open space. "Please call me Dante."

She cocked her head and examined the wall of muscle. "Named after the author who wrote about the layers of hell?"

"After my Neapolitan grandfather."

The corner of his mouth twitching upward. Finally, a reaction from Mr. No Nonsense SEAL.

"That explains the Italian features," she muttered, studying his profile. His dark Patrick Dempsey locks would probably look great on-camera. And he was 100 percent alpha male.

But he wasn't a cowboy. She needed the all-American look for her video love interest.

She turned and glanced back at the crew. Mason, her manager, was on his phone, trying to find a replacement for Jared.

Some people probably considered a Navy SEAL as all-American as a cowboy. And women might forgive the Italian features for a glimpse at those muscles...

Me! Me! Me!

“Seeing as this is your fault,” she began, her tone professional. Businesslike even. Because she was about to ask for a favor that had nothing to do with wanting to feel his body up against hers one more time.

“That’s a matter of opinion, Ms. Tate,” he said blandly.

“Seeing as I feel this is your fault, you could offer to fill in for Jared.”

“Thank you, ma’am,” he said, eyes front as if he was expecting an attack at any moment. “But I have a job. And I’m afraid it doesn’t involve starring in your show.”

“I thought SEALs were training to adapt to the situation.”

He glanced at her. “Combat situations, reconnaissance missions—those scenarios don’t involve impromptu music video shoots.”

“This one does,” she said firmly. “If you don’t, I’ll have to send the crew home and make the video another day. I know Mason”—she nodded toward her manager—“might have given you and Ronan the impression that I’m a big-deal star. But right now, I have one album, one major hit, and one tour. I’m paying for this video. Not my label. And it needs to be good. I can’t afford to waste money like this.”

“I’m sorry. But I suggest that you talk to your manager.” He returned to scanning the video shoot. Thanks to her no-show backup singer, watching this scene was about as exciting as watching paint dry in the freaking desert.

“Have you ever been poor?” she demanded.

“No, ma’am.”

“Well, I have. So have my younger brothers and my little sister. The money from this tour, from my shows, supports my family. They are counting on it. If I don’t deliver another hit, the money will dry up.”

“That’s a hell—a lot—of responsibility on your shoulders,” he said, tearing his gaze away from the rocks to look at her.

She shook her head. “I’m not risking my life or trying to save the world. I’m just trying to make things easier for my family. And right now, that means I need you to kiss me up against that rock.”

“On-camera,” he pointed out.

She nodded. “I’ll pay you what I offered Jared. It’s not much. But it will be in addition to your daily wages. Plus, you have a better chance of keeping me safe if you’re holding on to me.”

“That’s not how this works.” He raised his arm and ran his hand through his movie star hair. “Look, maybe Ronan would be willing—”

“I don’t want to kiss Ronan.” She forced a smile, determined to walk away with a yes. Because she needed to make this video. And she wanted to kiss him. “Please, Dante. Tell me you’ll give it a shot.”

“All right,” he said, folding his arms across his chest. “But I’m not tossing you up against that rock. If we do this, we do it my way.”

“As long as you take off your shirt and wear a cowboy hat, we can do it anyway you want, Mr. SEAL.”

Chapter Four

Dante had done a helluva lot of stupid things since he'd joined the Navy. But standing under the desert sun, shirtless and wearing borrowed jeans and a damn cowboy hat topped the list.

During Hell Week, the most infamous part of SEAL training, he'd survived drownproofing and paddled a boat straight for the rocks lining the Southern California coast. Sure, he'd been one of many who'd done it. But only someone who'd wanted to be a SEAL since he'd first learned about the teams from his Italian grandpa—the old man had been fascinated by his adopted country's armed forces—would endure that hell with a smile and a “Hooyah” for his instructors. At the end he'd received a trident pin and a place on the teams.

Today, he'd been promised a modest pay bump that he didn't give a damn about...and a kiss he couldn't stop wanting.

Chrissie danced her way down the canyon's path. Her hips swayed to a nonexistent rhythm. Dante supposed the music would be added later. Right now, the star of the show was lip-synching her way to him. And while the movement of her body made him hard, her lips left him aching for her mouth.

Her fingertips brushed his chest, teasing his senses. He wanted to reach for her. But he had instructions. Hell, the man in the director's chair had choreographed everything.

Chrissie's palm pressed against his bare skin, and he reminded himself that her touch

and that hint of seduction in her eyes—it wasn't for him. She was acting for the camera.

But his body hadn't received the memo. He hardened, anticipating the moment when her hips would move closer. He needed the damn green light to press her up against that rock and claim her mouth.

Her gaze met his. Those wide blue eyes...so damn sweet and innocent. And yeah, it was an act. Logic told him to ignore the intoxicating mix of I'm-going-to-seduce-you-now and take-me-sailor.

To hell with reason, and screw the instructions.

Dante reached for her and wrapped his hands around her waist. Drawing her to him, he waited for the moment her hips touched his and she felt his response to the role she'd asked him to play.

Her eyes widened, and the innocent pretense vanished. "This isn't right," she murmured.

"No, honey." He touched his lips to her ear. "It's not."

He shouldn't be here. In Vegas. In a country music video. In her arms. But he wasn't going to walk away from a second chance at claiming her mouth.

Carefully, he guided her back until her perfect ass touched the rock. He retraced his steps from that morning, pinned her arms overhead, and then let his hands roam.

"I should be seducing you," she insisted.

"Consider me at your mercy." He ran his hands along her toned legs, lifting her up.

Her thighs wrapped around his waist as if she remembered the movement. His hips pressed against her, showing her just how “seduced” he felt.

He dropped his gaze to her parted red lips. That mouth could drive a man insane. Hell, it probably enchanted half her fans night after night. He hadn’t heard her sing, but he could imagine watching her lips move. And hoping like hell he’d be the lucky bastard who explored them.

He lowered his head and brushed his mouth over hers. Gentle. Soft. He drew out the desire.

“More,” she whispered, and her fingers found their way into his hair. She held tight, refusing to let him pull back. Not that he planned to let her go.

“Just warming up,” he said. “Seeing how much you can take.”

She raised an eyebrow as if he’d tossed out a challenge. Then, she kissed him.

Dante lost track of where, when, and even why he was standing in the freaking canyon. He opened his mouth and allowed her tongue to tangle with his. He rocked against her as if he wanted to come in his pants. Even fully clothed, the feel of her body beneath his would do it. One more thrust—

“That’s hot,” a voice called. “But I think we have what we need.”

Dante pulled away. Reality came rushing back. They were in the desert and putting on a show. They had an audience. And shit, he was ten seconds away from exploding in his damn jeans like a teenager.

“I think we’ve put on enough of a performance,” he said, and he carefully lowered Chrissie’s legs and stepped away.

Her brow furrowed as if she'd forgotten where she was for a moment, too. But then her smile—the one she doled out to any passing fool—reappeared and erased the glimpse he'd caught of a young, innocent woman.

Dante looked away as his erection subsided. For a moment, he'd believed the innocent wonder he'd witnessed in her eyes. He'd felt wanted. Kissing her had become a necessity.

But Chrissie Tate didn't need him beyond one hot kiss. She'd been clear about that. It was an act, carefully designed to con the fools watching her video.

Holding his body away from hers, Dante placed his hands on the rock, palms flat, one on either side of Chrissie's head. "This is the point where you push me away, right?"

Page 10

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:09 am

“Yes,” she murmured. Her fingers released his hair and slid down the bare skin at his back and around to his chest. Her fingers pressed into his pecs as if she wasn’t sure if she wanted to hold on to him or thrust him away.

“Give it your best shot, honey.”

...

Chrissie struggled to recall why she needed to push the hard wall of muscle away. She’d rather stay right here, stuck between a rock and a hard place. She glanced down at his hips which, moments earlier, had been rubbing up against her as if he didn’t give a damn about her clothes or the camera

S...

The cameras.

Her music video.

Oh no.

She shoved hard against his chest. He stepped back, but she went with him.

Take your love...

The lyrics she’d written in response to her label’s demands for an upbeat love-em’-and-leave-em’ number ran through her head. She took a step forward, her gaze locked

on Dante's chiseled features.

And leave my heart...

But what she felt, the desire pulsing through her, shredding her concentration in the middle of this expensive shoot—this wasn't love. Her heart wasn't invested. It was pure lust.

But what did she know about love and lust? She'd spent the past six months on the road. The nine months before that in a recording studio. Her music career consumed her life and erased time for boyfriends. And the few men she'd dated before, back in Florida, they hadn't felt like this.

"Cut!"

Chrissie dropped her hands and stepped back. She turned to the director and reaching for the professional persona she wore like a shield. Lust. Love. Heartbreak. She didn't have time to experience those emotions firsthand. She couldn't allow messy feelings to distract her from her career. Sure, heartbreak might lead to strong lyrics. But what if it didn't? She couldn't risk her family's future on her desire for a man who planned to deploy as soon as his knee healed.

No, Chrissie Tate, country starlet, needed to keep singing and producing hits. The five people she loved with all her heart were counting on her. She refused to let them down. They'd already suffered too much—losing a son, a brother, a friend.

Rick, the director foisted on her by her label, gave her a smile that fell short of genuine. "Chrissie, you nailed it on the first try." He stopped by her side and turned to Dante. "And you have raw talent."

You have no idea, Mr. Director. You didn't kiss him.

She glanced at her bodyguard and swore she saw a flush creeping up his cheeks. She had a feeling “country music video star” wasn’t something he wanted on his resume alongside “fighting terrorists” and “rescuing the innocent.”

“So we’re done?” Chrissie said, her tone firm but polite. “Ahead of schedule?”

“We have what we need for today. I’ll talk to your manager about the vocal track.” The director turned and headed for Mason, who’d stupidly worn a three-piece suit to the desert.

“Time to head back to the hotel and get ready for the show.” She turned to the small tent where she’d stashed her bag, grabbed a bottle of water, and tossed one to Dante.

“Thanks.” He set it aside and reached for his shirt. “I’m riding back with you.”

Great. Thirty minutes trapped in a car with a man who’d nearly given her an orgasm against the canyon wall. Chrissie headed for the parking area and the blue luxury sedan the hotel had graciously lent her.

“I suppose you want to drive?” she said when they reached the car.

He shook his head. And for the first time, she noticed he was shifting his weight to his left leg. Had today been too much for his injured knee?

She pushed the thought aside as she settled into the driver’s seat. He should have said something if his knee was bothering him. He could have asked for a break. They would have needed to do a second take. But still, he shouldn’t have ignored the pain.

Or maybe he was too caught up in his body’s reaction to that kiss...

“I’m sorry,” he said as she steered the car onto the main road.

Page 11

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:09 am

She kept her gaze fixed on the two-lane road. “For saving the day? I thought—”

“For getting carried away,” he said in a firm and clear tone. “During the shoot. It was unprofessional and—”

“Oh no.” The words slipped out as the realization dawned on her. “Do you have a girlfriend?”

Please don’t tell me you’re married.

She glanced down at his left hand. Her stomach did a somersault as she forced her gaze back to the road. There was a faded tan line on his ring finger. What if he’d removed the ring before his last mission, or before the surgery, and forgot to put it back on? Maybe he’d lost it—

“No girlfriend,” he said.

“You’re married.”

Oh God, what have I done?

“Divorced.”

What?!

She stopped at a red light and turned to him. No woman in her right mind would walk away from those muscles. Of course, he might have been the one to leave...

“She didn’t like my job,” he said.

“What? She was too afraid that you’d die out there, so she left first?” She hit the gas a little harder than she’d intended, and the car sped forward.

“Easy,” he said. “I know time is money, but we have a couple of hours before the show.”

“If a woman had done that to my brother while he was away...”

“You’d what? Set your backup singer friend on her? Let him slam her up against the rocks?”

“It’s wrong.” She took a sharp right into the hotel parking lot. “Your job, what you do—”

“It’s hard on wives and girlfriends. I was away a lot. Most of the year. She never knew where I was or when I’d come back.” He shrugged. “She got lonely.”

“She cheated on you!” She threw the car into park and turned to him. “Was she crazy? You have the best body I’ve ever seen. And you...I felt it...your...”

She felt the heat rising in her cheeks now. He raised an eyebrow as if waiting for her to say the word—cock. She’d been so caught up in fury she’d almost told him he had an amazing erection.

But how could someone cheat on a man who’d put everything on the line for his country? Didn’t his ex realize how lucky she was that Dante had survived? She’d give anything to have her brother back. Anything. And Dante’s ex had walked away.

“I hate her,” she said.

He shook his head. “She wasn’t a bad person. I think she had it in the back of her mind that I’d leave the teams eventually. But I’m not planning to walk away until I physically can’t do the job. Being a SEAL—it’s all I ever wanted to do. I’m going to serve my country until they make me quit.”

“Thank you,” she said firmly.

His brow drew together. “For what?”

“For believing that it’s worth it, for saying that my brother died for something greater than one man or one woman.”

“He died protecting our freedom. It doesn’t matter what he was doing that day or where he was stationed,” he said with a ferocity that echoed how she felt. “My grandfather fought his way into this country, hoping for the promise of freedom. I do what I do to keep that promise alive. And so did your brother.”

She stared at the hero riding shotgun. He kissed like a god, possessed movie-star muscles, and understood the passion driving her career. Dante was close to perfect in her book. His ex-wife was a fool to walk away.

But Chrissie knew she needed to steer clear, too. If she wasn’t careful, she could fall for him, tumble head-over-heels until she lost sight of the goal line—a long-term career. A long-distance relationship was not part of her plan. Not that he’d offered more than a kiss during her video shoot...

But she’d felt his excitement. Sure, she could chalk that up to a normal male reaction to a woman’s kiss, like the way she wanted to explore his muscles. And yes, she wanted to explore the physical aspects of their connection. Still...those words...

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:09 am

My grandfather fought his way into this country, hoping for the promise of freedom. I do what I do to keep that promise alive.

There was a lot more to U.S. Navy SEAL Dante Raske than his mouth and his biceps. And she couldn't deny that she wanted to learn more.

“Thank you for standing in for Jared today,” she said as she opened her car door and set one foot on the pavement. “And you don't need to apologize for getting carried away. To be honest, I did to. That was the best kiss I've ever had. But I wouldn't expect anything less from a Navy SEAL.”

She quickly stepped out of the car and closed the door behind her. She needed to get inside before she did something stupid and added Want to get carried away again tonight? After my show...

She heard footsteps, and a second later he was at her side. She glanced at him and saw the heat in his dark eyes.

“I strive for perfection.” He kept his gaze locked with hers. “And not just when it comes to kissing.”

Her lips parted, and she stopped in the center of the hotel lobby. “I need to get ready for my show,” she said, her voice so low because she didn't quite trust herself not to scream Take me now! Take me here! “But, I'll keep that in mind, Mr. SEAL.”

Chrissie closed her eyes and pictured her brother—at five, at fifteen, at twenty-five, and at his funeral. She put her heart and soul into every performance. But tonight, she sang *How Do I Remember You?* for the SEAL standing on the sidelines. She let the memories of her brother wash over her. She shed tears, allowing them to fall onto her guitar. Because she wanted the man who'd kissed like a Vegas god to know that what he'd said earlier in the car—that her brother had died for a promise of freedom that so many took for granted—those words meant more to her than every dollar she'd earned from her number one hit.

And because I can't risk revisiting his kisses while I'm on this stage—especially not while I'm performing this number.

She hadn't written these lyrics to become famous. She'd needed an outlet. A way to express her grief.

"Thank you," she said into the wireless microphone at the end of the number. The Las Vegas crowd roared its approval. "That song means a lot to me. Thank you for letting me share it with you."

The audience continued to clap and cheer. Chrissie turned and glanced offstage. And spotted a redheaded SEAL wearing a black T-shirt and camo print pants that would never help him hide in Sin City standing by the sound console.

Where's Dante?

But her band started the next song on the playlist. She forced her attention back to the stage. She was only a couple of numbers into her two-hour show. She needed to stay focused and give everything she had to her fans. They'd spent their hard-earned dollars on these tickets.

But after the show?

I'll find him.

When she did, she wanted to return to that moment in the canyon when he'd kissed her. It had felt real. Aside from the heart behind her lyrics, nothing else seemed solid these days. And all of it, from her family to her label, required something from her.

Tonight, I want something for myself. I don't want to sing about sex and lust. I want to experience it. I want to find out how he delivers on his promise of perfection.

She wanted one night with her very own Navy SEAL before she sent him back to California to focus on the job he loved. She'd mulled the idea over and over while preparing for tonight's show. She couldn't afford to fall for him. But she wasn't a misguided Juliet who'd tumble into love after a perfect orgasm delivered by an all-American Hero...

Sure, it complicated things that Dante seemed to comprehend her passion and her drive in a way she suspected Romeo had never understood Juliet. But she was a grown woman, not a teenager. She could have a one-night stand without falling in love, especially because she knew he was leaving.

He didn't belong in Sin City, protecting her from a nonexistent threat. He should be training, working on his knee, and getting ready to fight for freedom.

After they explored what would happen when he kissed her off-camera.

Two hours later, Chrissie stepped off the stage and marched over to her bodyguard. "Where's Dante?" she demanded.

"He's resting, ma'am."

Her brow furrowed. "Is he okay? Did he reinjure his knee on the video shoot?"

“Nah, I think he’s coming to terms with the fact that the guys on the teams are going to give him hell for starring in a music video.”

Oh no, she hadn’t thought about how his teammates would handle the news of Dante’s performance in the shoot.

“I hope I didn’t get him into trouble with the Navy.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:09 am

“No, ma’am,” Ronan said firmly. “If the guys weren’t giving him hell about the video, they’d find something else. And he’d be the first to return fire, so to speak.”

“Boys will be boys and SEALs will be SEALs,” she said. “Or something like that.”

Ronan nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Still, I owe him an apology.” Perhaps a naked apology.

“He’ll be on duty later,” Ronan said. “If it’s all right with you, I’ve asked him to cover the overnight shift. He’ll stay out of your space. In the hall.”

“He’s planning to stand guard outside my room all night?” she said as they reached her dressing room. “That can’t be good for his knee.”

“He’ll be fine,” Ronan assured her. “The hotel won’t have the extra security in place for you to sign autographs tonight, so—”

“I always do autographs after a concert,” she protested, her focus returning to her job.

“I’m sorry,” he said firmly. “But the hotel doesn’t want to risk it without the added muscle. They’re nervous, too, after the incident in Phoenix. And I can’t say I disagree.”

“There are going to be a lot of disappointed fans,” she muttered as they reached her dressing room.

“That’s why I’ve asked Dante to keep a close eye on you for a few hours after the show,” he said. “If you want to go out, he’ll need to stay with you.”

“I’m not going anywhere tonight,” she said as Ronan opened the door and walked into her dressing room.

“Your friend Mason said you wanted to hit up the Vegas shops,” Ronan called as he searched the small room, which contained a makeup table, loveseat, and her wardrobe for the show.

“He’s my manager, not my friend,” she corrected, still waiting in the doorway. They’d gone through this routine earlier in the day, and she remembered the protocol. “And yes, I’m planning to shop. But I’ll call the stores now and have them send a few things up. I know what I want.”

Disguises that might catch the eye of his teammate. She had about zero experience with seduction. But she knew how to put on a show. She could only hope it was enough to tempt Dante away from his post in the hall and into her bed for the night.

One night and then tomorrow, I’ll set him free.

“I’ll let Raske know.” He returned to the door. “Your dressing room is all clear.”

“Dante Raske? Doesn’t sound very Italian.”

“His mom’s side is from Italy. But his dad was Scandinavian, I think. I met Mr. Raske once. Big guy,” said the six-foot-something wall of muscle in her doorway. “I’ll step outside and call my teammate while you change, Ms. Tate.”

She reached for her earring and began removing the back. “Tell Dante if he wants to stand guard, he can sit inside my suite. I won’t have an injured SEAL collapsing in

pain outside my room.”

Ronan let out a bark of laughter. “I’ll let him know.”

“I’ll be fine out here.” Dante stood in the hall. If he walked into the country star’s hotel room, if he sat on her couch during his shift, Ronan would give him hell. And yeah, the rest of the team would hear about it.

Dante couldn’t manage an hour on his feet in a Vegas hotel. Or, if you’re heading out for a recon mission, bring a couch for Dante.

“I need you to come inside,” Chrissie said.

Dante mentally added a “me” to the end of her sentence. And no, he couldn’t walk into her hotel room. It was like walking into a battle he knew he’d lose. Hell, one he wanted to lose. Because even though he’d sworn off Vegas flings, he was pretty damn close to tossing that rule aside for a woman who should be off-limits—the star he needed to protect.

“Ma’am—”

“Call me Chrissie.” She took his hand. And even the promise of endless teasing from his fellow SEALs didn’t make him pull free from her hold. He followed her inside like a freaking lap dog. Because dammit, he wanted the chance to prove he could offer her a helluva lot more than perfect kisses.

She released him and walked over to the loveseat in the sitting area. “Make yourself comfortable. Since you’re here, you can help me with my disguises. Sit down, and I’ll be right back.”

Dante followed her request as if she’d issued an order. He sat and watched as she

headed off to the bedroom. The door closed behind her.

What the hell am I doing here?

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:09 am

Yeah, he had experience with disguises. He'd spent months traveling along foreign borders dressed to blend in with the tribal warlords. He'd learned to mask his Italian features and walk, talk, and dress like the militants he'd been sent to take out under the cover of night. He'd snuck into their homes, looking like he was one of them, and wiped them out...

But this wasn't the Middle East. And Chrissie Tate wasn't on a mission to eradicate the people who wanted to attack America, Europe, and the innocent people in their own damn countries. When she emerged from her room wearing another awful wig, he'd tell her to skip the costumes and focus on listening to the people hired to keep her safe.

The bedroom door opened and Chrissie stepped out. "What the—"

He'd had enough training to school his expression, but damn, for a second he thought his jaw would hit the floor alongside the expletive he'd nearly tossed out.

She froze just beyond the bedroom door. "What do you think?"

I should run for cover, because in that outfit, you're launching one Hell of an attack.

He stared at the French maid getup that looked as if it had been purchased in a store that catered to male fantasies. The low-cut, sweetheart neckline would make it pretty damn hard to bend over and clean without her breasts slipping out. And while the corset around her slim waist accentuated her curves, he'd bet most hotel maids would find them uncomfortable.

“The store forgot to include the stockings and heels,” she murmured.

“And the rest of the skirt?” he asked, his gaze heading south. The bottom half of her outfit stopped short of covering her panties, never mind her bare legs.

“You don’t like

what they sent?” She turned around and offered him a view from the back.

Earlier, he’d run his hand over her backside while hoisting her up and wrapping her legs around his waist. Now, he wanted to let his fingers roam under her skirt.

“I like it just fine,” he said. “But you might have a hard time blending in with the other maids.”

And I might have to kill any man who sees you like this.

Not that he had a claim on her. He was her bodyguard, not her boyfriend. But still...

“Ms. Tate,” he said, looking her straight in the eyes. He wasn’t hauling ass out of here. Not a chance. Sure, he’d said no more flings. And he knew better than to get involved with the talent. But somewhere in the unwritten rules, there had to be an exclusion for sexy-as-sin French maid outfits.

“Chrissie,” she corrected.

He pushed himself off the couch and took a step forward. And she held her ground.

“Honey,” he said, because she was right. They’d moved past formalities. Still, he needed to be crystal clear. If she was toying with him, if this was her idea of punishment for the bodyguards she’d been clear she didn’t want watching her six, he

needed to know before he moved another inch. “I need to know right now—what the hell are you doing?”

She inhaled and, for a second, he swore her breasts would spill over her top. Her cheeks turned pink, suggesting an innocence that was at odds with her outfit. “I want to find out if you meant what you said. If you can deliver perfection beyond kisses...”

Ah hell. His words were coming back to bite him. He should have held back this afternoon. Instead, he’d allowed her passionate insistence that she understood his drive to serve, that she was on his side, not his ex-wife’s, push him to toss out an invitation to cross the line between professional and personal.

“So, I’m...” she continued. “I’m, well, I’m seducing a SEAL.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Are you now?”

She nodded, and her fingers toyed with her skirt’s indecent hemline. “That’s my plan.”

Everything about her so-called plan sounded like trouble. But the part of him that craved the risk that went hand-in-hand with jumping out of helicopters into the rough, cold ocean waves while wearing enough gear to drown, the side of him that went into hostile territory and chatted up the targets before eliminating them...yeah, that part buried his logic and demanded that he sit his ass down.

He took a step back and sank into the seat. “And just how do you plan to seduce me?”

Chapter Six

Chrissie summoned the courage that had pushed her this far. The man who lost control when he kissed her sat on her couch, waiting for her next move. If she walked

over to him...

Her legs started moving, carrying her closer. He leaned back, his legs splayed and his right arm resting on the side of the sofa. He looked calm and in control, while her nerves ran in circles firing off different instructions.

Jump him.

Kiss him.

Run away.

Women probably threw themselves at him all the time. The man was a SEAL, the best of the best. Fearless. Brave. Heroic. Ripped...

She froze, her legs a few inches away from his. What could she possibly offer this man that would make him melt? At twenty-three, she'd nearly returned to virgin territory. She could win over her fans night after night with her words. She could appear bold, even brazen, on the set for her video shoot. But here? Just her and the SEAL?

"Don't quit now, honey," he murmured, his tone soft and surprisingly gentle. "You're doing great."

She searched his face for a sign of pity. After growing up with next to nothing and enduring the sympathy that often went with asking for assistance like free lunch at school, she had a low tolerance for those "poor little girl" looks. And she didn't want pity sex. She wanted to win his desire.

But there wasn't a hint of sympathy in his eyes. Behind his relaxed façade, she sensed a need that reflected hers. And she moved between his splayed legs.

Touch him... Take him...

She gave her instincts free rein. Bent at the waist, she placed her hands on his thighs.

His gaze dropped to her breasts, and she felt the tension ripple through him as she let him look.

Now tease him...

She ran her hands up his legs and brushed past the hard bulge beneath his jeans. "I'll come back for that," she murmured. "But first..."

She wrapped her hands around the hem of his T-shirt and drew it up. Her knuckles glided over his abs. And then, thanks to her years of dance training, everything from tap to the more elaborate choreography she learned for her concerts, she drew his shirt over his head while climbing onto his lap.

She straddled his legs, and her knees pressed into the loveseat cushions. Her skirt now decorated her waist, but he still kept his hands to himself.

She leaned forward and pressed her lips to his ear. "What are you waiting for?"

"An invitation." He growled.

"Touch me," she said. "Please."

His hands wrapped around her hips and drew her close against him. He rocked his hips up into hers, and she felt her control slipping away. And the realization dawned on her as the feel of him, even through his jeans, sent little shockwaves radiating out from her core. He'd been holding back, because once he started, he might not be able to stop.

His hands slipped around to her bare backside. "A short skirt and thong underwear," he murmured. "That's a dangerous combination."

His finger teased the thin strip of fabric running between her cheeks, pulling it up. The front of her panties drew tight across her clit. She leaned back and closed her eyes, trying to decipher the sensations. His hard cock pressing against her. The silk underwear. His fingers releasing the back of her thong and gently slipping it back between her cheeks...

“Tell me more,” he said. “What else do you want?”

He wanted directions? She opened her eyes and parted her lips. “You’ve already kissed me on-camera. Let’s see how you do when nobody’s watching.”

“I don’t need an audience.”

She was still sitting on his lap, but even though she was providing the roadmap, she’d lost control of her seduction. With a grin that told her he’d taken over and he knew it, he ran his hands up to her waist and drew her back. Then he lowered his mouth to the bare skin peeking out over her maid costume.

Her nipples grew tight with anticipation. But he obeyed the barrier set by her neckline, never allowing his tongue to dip below.

“I can take it off,” she murmured.

He lifted his lips off her breasts and met her gaze. “Not a good idea. You should never abandon your disguise in the middle of a mission.”

“Is that a Navy SEAL rule?”

“Right now, it’s my rule.”

As if he needed to prove he’d claimed control, he ran his hands down her bare legs

and then guided her feet onto the loveseat beside him. “Plus, I like the challenge,” he added. “Now, be a good little maid and place your left foot on the sofa.”

“Dante—”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:09 am

“Trust me,” he murmured, guiding her leg into place.

“Okay.”

He let out a low growl that hinted approval. His hands returned to her waist and drew her hips forward, toward his lips. Her left leg bent sharply and her right knee pressed into the back of the loveseat. The position felt precarious, impossible to maintain—

His tongue teased her through her panties, and she forgot about her legs.

“Dante,” she murmured. “What are you doing?”

“Be quiet and let me kiss you.” He drew her panties aside with one hand, and the other held tight to her bottom as if she might try to run away.

Never from this...

His tongue lapped at her, paused to draw circles around her entrance, and then dipped inside. Her muscles clenched in response, as if wishing to draw him in. But with her legs spread, she remained open and at his mercy.

>

“Later, I’m going to bury myself inside you,” he murmured, a promise to the wet, needy place between her thighs. “But not yet.”

His tongue glided up to her clit, and then he went to work. The hotel room, the crazy

costume she'd ordered from the sex toy store in one of the Sin City hotels, her reason for being in Vegas...it all faded.

Oh God...so good...

Someone was moaning. It took a moment for her to realize she was making that low, needy sound.

"More," she pleaded. She'd seduce him later. After. Right now, she wanted to ride his mouth until she claimed the orgasm that had eluded her in the canyon earlier. No one was watching them now. No one knew he was here. This—his mouth buried between her legs—it was just for her.

"Ahhh..."

She fell apart, could do nothing more than offer him one garbled sound after another. For someone who wrote pitch-perfect lyrics about life, love, and even sex, she couldn't manage a single word.

"Hmm..." She groaned as the pleasure radiated upward, through her...everywhere. Her muscles relaxed into his grip, and her weight sagged against him.

"Easy, honey," he murmured. "I don't think anyone can maintain that position for long."

She felt his hands on her, shifting her body. Somehow she'd pitched her upper body over her raised leg. He adjusted her until the loveseat was at her back. She closed her eyes and held tight to the overwhelming sense of well-being radiating through her.

Why had she waited so long for this? All of the stress—her tour, her family—it faded into the background. The feeling that nothing could go wrong as long as she stayed

right here, that sensation dominated everything.

“You okay, honey?”

She heard the note of humor in his tone.

“Shh,” she murmured. “I want to spend a little more time with that orgasm.”

“Take your time. I’ll be right here when you’re ready.”

...

“You’re still here.”

Dante blinked open his eyes as the hotel room lights turned on overhead. Then he pushed himself into an upright position on the cramped loveseat. And for the first time in months, another part of his body challenged his knee for “the biggest pain in his ass” position. His back ached from sleeping on the sofa that would barely accommodate a kid, never mind a SEAL who towered over half his teammates.

“I fell asleep,” he muttered, glancing at the kitchenette in her suite. This top-of-the-line Vegas room had to have a coffeemaker. He scanned the counters and found his target. He turned to the woman who’d tried to seduce him last night—before she’d passed out. “Mind if I make coffee?”

“You’re still here, and I woke up in my bed, dressed...” She waved at the bedroom door.

“I carried you in there.” He stood and headed for the coffeemaker. “I didn’t want to disturb you by taking off your disguise. And you know, if the bad guys showed up in the middle of the night, it might have proved useful.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:09 am

“You didn’t want to wake me up,” she said. “You didn’t want more, something for yourself.”

“That’s a lie, and you know it,” he said mildly. He pulled open the cupboard and found a basket of supplies including ground coffee, filters, and mugs.

She’d felt his hard-on through his jeans last night. And licking her until she came all over his face had only sharpened his need.

“But you fell asleep,” he said.

Enjoying your orgasm.

And for the first time since he’d run to her aid in the canyon, Chrissie Tate, America’s country sweetheart, had looked completely at ease. He couldn’t bring himself to disrupt her relaxed, peaceful sleep. So he’d carefully carried her to bed, and he’d tucked her in fully dressed just in case the act of stripping off that maid’s costume disrupted her slumber.

Then he’d visited her bathroom and taken care of his aching dick. And yes, he’d closed his eyes and pictured her spread legs hovering over his face while he came, but it still felt like the right thing to do.

“I’m sorry,” she said.

He glanced over his shoulder and found her standing on the edge of the kitchenette’s tile floor. “Honey, seeing you in that maid’s outfit was enough for me.”

“But you didn’t—”

“And there’s nothing wrong with that. Maybe someday I’ll ask you to return the favor and then pass out on you. But there isn’t a rule stating I need to come if you do, honey. Remember that, all right? You can add it to the list right below ‘kissing should never hurt.’ Even if it’s just practice.” He turned back to the coffeemaker. “Now, how do you like your coffee, Ms. Tate?”

“Strong,” she said.

He added more grounds. “Me too.”

Chapter Seven

“Something’s not right with your mic, Ms. Tate.”

Hank, the assistant audio engineer, dropped to his knees and started fiddling with the wireless microphone pack strapped to her back beneath her fitted gingham shirt. She always performed the first two numbers in the same down-home country outfit. Jeans, a button-down red shirt tied at her waist, cowboy boots, and the Stetson her brother had given her for her eighteenth birthday.

“I noticed when the vocals dropped out,” she said with a sigh. She’d completed the opening, upbeat number with a handheld. But for the next one, the song everyone came to hear, she needed her hands for her guitar. She always performed the acoustic version of How Do I Remember You? but she also liked to walk around the stage. If she sat on a stool with a handheld mic on a stand, she might lose herself in the words—or worse, the memories.

“I’ll switch out the pack,” Hank said, his forearms brushing her backside while he worked.

She'd grown accustomed to mic repairs and quick changes. But the big bad alpha SEAL standing watch five feet away? U.S. Navy SEAL Dante Raske, the man who'd given her the orgasm to end all orgasms last night and then tucked her into bed, looked ready to introduce his fists to Hank's jaw if the audio technician got fresh with her.

She met Dante's gaze and gave her head a subtle shake. Her guard SEAL didn't need to worry about her married audio tech. Hank had one goal—get the talent, namely her, back onstage.

“You're all set,” Hank said, rising to his feet.

Great, now it was time to take the stage and bare her heart and soul to her fans. She had to deliver on this number, and every other one. She moved to the stairs, paused, and glanced over at Dante.

She'd been planning to send the SEALs packing this morning. But after last night, after Dante had given her exactly what she wanted without demanding anything in return, she couldn't fire him or his redheaded partner. She'd told herself one more show. She could end their guard dog routine tomorrow, before her final Vegas performance.

And while he was here...

She looked Dante straight in the eye. “Mr. SEAL,” she called, one foot on the steps leading to the stage. “Pay attention to this next song. This is what country's all about.”

“Sex?” His lips curved into one of his rare smiles. She'd witnessed that grin last night before he'd devoured her.

She shook her head. “Heart.”

She paused on the stairs and pointed to the blond-haired eight-year-old standing beside the sound board set up to mix the track for her earpiece. “And watch what you say about my music,” and last night, “in front of my kid sister, okay?”

His smile vanished as he glanced at Melissa. And, she recalled, he’d had a few choice words for her manager when he’d learned that her mother had dropped off Melissa for the show.

Are you fucking kidding me? You’re worried about her safety, so you’re adding an eight-year-old to the mix?

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

But Dante didn't realize that no one had any control over her mother these days.

“And keep an eye out for Melissa, okay? If she gets tired, have someone show her to the greenroom.”

“Yes, ma'am,” he said without hesitation.

Back to ma'am now?

She turned and headed for the stage. But out of the corner of her eye, she saw her overprotective SEAL move closer to the sound console and Melissa, the youngest of the Tate brood. The blond-haired little girl was the “oops” baby of the family, born twenty-something years after the accidental pregnancy that had led to her parents' rushed marriage. And Melissa was one of the main reasons Chrissie fought for her career. She loved singing her songs. But Melissa owned her heart. Just like her seventeen-year-old twin brothers Brandon and Matthew.

She thought about offering another thank-you to the bodyguard she planned to fire in the morning. Instead, she walked onto the stage and picked up her guitar.

She couldn't see faces in the audience standing under the bright lights. But she could hear the roar of the crowd quiet down as she played the first few notes. They'd come here for this. Her number one hit. She opened her mouth and began to sing.

...

I wear your dog tags... But that's not the you I knew...

The guitar chords filled the theater, each heartfelt note more out of place than the last against the backdrop of a Sin City stage.

Cold metal against my skin... But I close my eyes and see the boy who stole my dolls, the friend who held my hand... How do I remember you?

He'd seen war, but he'd never witnessed it through a family member's eyes. How the hell could she go up there and offer up her heart night after night? How could she bare her soul to a theater full of strangers? In Vegas of all places?

She wasn't afraid.

But he was. He couldn't open up like that. Not to a room full of strangers or one woman. Not after his ex. Sure, he'd made light of it on the drive yesterday. But sometimes it felt like the woman he'd vowed to love for the rest of his life had carved a hole in his chest and taken a piece of his heart. He hadn't felt whole since. And he didn't have a clue how to move on without that part of himself. He gave his all when it came to his country and love. But right now, it didn't feel like he had his everything to give.

He glanced down at his busted knee. The scar was hidden beneath his jeans. But he knew it was there. A bright red reminder that at this point in time he fell short of Navy SEAL standards.

"She's amazing, right?" The little girl to his left called as the song ended and the audience erupted. The kid's blond hair and blue eyes matched

her big sister's.

"Yeah, she's good," he said.

“She’s the best,” the kid said, her voice firm.

“Do you attend a lot of her concerts?” he asked.

The child shook her head. “No. But I’m on spring break, so my momma had to bring me. Usually I stay home with my father. But he’s too sad right now.”

After hearing that song, I can understand why.

Chrissie launched into an upbeat number about broken hearts and lost dogs. Yeah, this part of country music wasn’t for him. But he kept his gaze fixed on the star. She danced up and down the stage, shaking her perfect, pop-princess body for the crowd.

No, he didn’t like this version of country music. But the country star? She was damn near close to irresistible.

Hell, I hope she follows through and fires my ass tomorrow.

Because after kissing her until she came, watching her pass out, and then listening to her number one hit, he had a feeling there was a lot more to Chrissie Tate than her looks. And right or wrong, he wanted to explore every part of her.

Dante scanned the crowd. The concert had wrapped up ten minutes ago. But, instead of taking a rest, Chrissie was determined to greet her fans. Why the hell was she wasting energy he was pretty damn sure she didn’t have to spare on worst-case scenarios? One look and Dante knew her fans were pushing the limits of the Vegas hotel security.

“I recommend using another exit,” he said, turning away from the stage door that led to the packed hotel corridor.

Chrissie had traded her country-girl button-down for a red, white, and blue sequined top. Melissa, her Mini-Me, stood at her side and held tight to her big sister's hand.

Chrissie shook her head. "I need to sign autographs."

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

“And then we’re getting ice cream,” her kid sister informed him.

He folded his arms across his chest and faced them, his back to the exit. The adoring fans on the other side chanted “Chrissie Tate!” over and over. But what if someone in the crowd wanted more than her autograph?

“Order room service,” he said.

“I was planning on it.” Chrissie smiled at him. That same fake grin, dammit. “But first I need to sign autographs. Those people have been waiting out there. I owe them.”

“You gave them a great show,” he said evenly.

“You liked it?” Her smile touched her eyes for a brief second. But then the grin she wore like body armor returned.

Hell, he wanted to tell her that wasn’t a guarantee. There were some things it couldn’t protect against. Like an IED or a shot to the head.

Or a crazy-ass country music fan.

“Yeah. I’m not about to go out and buy cowboy boots or anything—”

“But you liked hearing songs about pickups, dead dogs, and the good old U.S.A.,” she teased as she tried to walk around him.

“Not the ones about the trucks and the dogs.” He moved in front of her. “But the rest were about you. I liked them because the lyrics were honest.”

Her smile vanished, but she didn’t look away. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now let’s find another way out of this place.”

She drew a deep breath. “You’re fired.”

“I’ll pass the message on to Ronan. But I’m still not letting you through this door.”

Mason rushed over. He’d traded his suit for ripped jeans that looked as if he bought them that way and a button-down shirt. “What’s the holdup, Chrissie? The crowd is getting restless.”

“The hired muscle needed to share his concerns. I was just explaining that I had faith in his ability to think on his feet and keep me safe.” She turned to Mason, her expression a mask of concern Dante was pretty damn certain she didn’t feel. “Although, if his knee is bothering him, if he isn’t up for it, I suppose we could borrow one of the big guys the hotel hired.”

Not up for it my ass.

She was baiting him, and he knew it. But he’d spent too many weeks sitting on the sidelines feeling inadequate to take the high road. And option two, the guys who’d beefed up at the gym and applied for a bouncer job? Dante would escort her through the crowd with two broken knees before he let that happen.

“My knee’s fine,” he lied. The repaired ligaments had been giving him hell since the intermission. He should have watched the show from the audience instead of offering to cover the second shift so that Ronan could see his girl perform the opening act

from the audience.

“If we go out there,” Dante said. “We do this my way. If I tell you to hit the ground, you lie down. If I tell you to run—”

“I run,” Chrissie said. “You know, I usually like to be the one giving the orders, seeing as I foot the bill, but for you, Mr. SEAL, I’ll make an exception.”

“Mr. SEAL,” her Mini-Me repeated with a giggle.

Dante looked from one sister to the other. Leading them through the crowd promised trouble. But she was right. He didn’t back down from a challenge. And he didn’t admit defeat, especially not in front of a man who paid twice as much for jeans someone else had ripped for him.

Dante lowered his arms, turned, and opened the door. “I’ll go first.”

“Such chivalry,” Chrissie said, her voice light and playful. But then, she didn’t look at the crowd and see a goatfuck waiting to happen.

“When I throw you over my shoulder and run for safety, then you can thank me for serving as your white knight.”

He walked into the wide, carpeted hotel hallway. Metal gates designed to keep the crowd securely on the other side bordered the walkway. Hotel security guards were positioned every ten feet eyeing the packed-in crowd.

Dante’s teeth gnashed together. Whoever had dreamed up this exit scenario worked in the front office and spent her days with her nose buried in spreadsheets. He glanced back at the smiling, waving talent. Yeah, that bottom-line-crazed person might be the star, who didn’t seem the least bit concerned with her personal safety.

Chrissie waved to the crowd with one hand and clenched her sister's fingers in the other. Her Mini-Me looked as if Christmas had arrived early and Santa had delivered a herd of ponies. But the kid wasn't looking out at the adoring crowd. She was staring up at the big sister.

“I love you!”

The scream cut through the rumble of “Over here, Chrissie!” and “Sign this, please!” He heard the fierce, yet desperate note in the cry and felt a rush of adrenaline. He scanned the crowd and spotted the man leaping over the metal gate five feet from one guard. The hotel’s hired muscle had his back turned to the guy.

Blond hair.

Military cut.

Wild, blue eyes.

Chrissie Tate T-shirt.

Knife.

“Get back,” Dante shouted, making the split-second decision to stand his ground and fight. He’d rather haul ass. But his goddamn knee might struggle under Chrissie’s weight. Add her sister and he might fall on his butt while running for safety. And he couldn’t leave her little sister behind with the security goons who’d let the man with the knife jump the fence.

Palm flat, Dante zeroed in on the man’s face. He aimed for the nose and thrust his hand to the ceiling. And thank you Jesus! The crazed fan dropped his knife and screamed with pain. Blood flowed down his face, but Dante didn’t wait to inspect the damage. He’d broken the guy’s nose. Years of training in hand-to-hand combat

situations all but guaranteed that man's face would never be the same.

He wrapped one arm around the stunned star. Chrissie's jaw dropped open as if reaching for the butt-ugly hotel carpet, and her eyes remained wide. With the other arm, he scooped up her little sister and held her against his chest. Tears streamed down the kid's cheeks, and her breathing was erratic.

"Everything is going to be fine," he promised the Tate sisters. "You're safe."

"He had a knife," Chrissie murmured, her hoarse tone barely above a whisper.

"Yeah." He guided them toward the door, moving fast.

"It's the guy from my trailer," she continued. "Here."

Dante mentally added "stalker" to "crazy-ass fan."

"Call the police," he barked to the guard nearby. The man nodded, his eyes nearly as wide as Chrissie's had been a moment ago. But at least the hotel's hired muscle had the sense to open the door, wait for Dante to rush through with the ladies, and slam it closed behind them.

He headed down the hall for the greenroom, brushing past the remaining crew. Then he closed the door behind him and set Melissa on the brown leather sofa. Gently, he guided Chrissie to the kid's side.

"He had a knife." The country star kept her wide-eyed gaze on him. "And you slapped him. You..." She raised an eyebrow. "You hit like a girl."

Dante shook his head as the adrenaline rush faded. "Most of the women I rescue say thank you."

“Thank you,” she said, her voice open, honest, and so damn sincere. She drew Melissa to her side and ran her hand over her sister’s long blond hair. “I froze when I saw him. I panicked. I didn’t know what to do.”

The little girl’s crying subsided as her grip tightened around Chrissie.

“If someone gave me a microphone and pushed me out on the stage, I couldn’t sing a note,” he said, withdrawing his cell from his pocket. Now that she was secure, he needed to contact Ronan. He wanted his teammate out there, dealing with the police, with Mason, and making damn sure they knew this guy had been stalking Chrissie.

“But then you hit him with your hand,” she said again, and he glanced down at her. “I think I could do that. With a few lessons.”

Dante heard the implied from you. Now wasn’t the time to crush her confidence. She should know how to defend herself. But he felt like he’d landed himself back at the music video shoot or on the loveseat in her hotel room. And dammit, he wasn’t the answer to all her problems. Maybe this one. But...

He didn’t want to get involved. No flings. No heartache. He’d already given her one orgasm. Another would cross the line. He needed to strengthen his knee and get back to work. He had a job he loved. And it didn’t involve training drop-dead gorgeous country music stars to fend off stalkers.

“Yes, you could,” he said.

“We’ll start tomorrow,” she said, her voice strong, as if the thought of learning how to break a man’s nose had extinguished her fear. Hell, maybe it had.

“I’m fired, remember?” he said.

“I’m rehiring you,” she said. “And offering you a contract extension. Come on tour with me.”

“I have a job.”

Page 21

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

“I know. But until your knee heals, you can’t do it, can you?”

Dante gritted his teeth. Why the hell did those words sound so emasculating? He’d hurt himself during a freaking rescue. And tonight, he’d saved her ass.

“I should be cleared for duty in a few weeks.”

“Come on tour with me,” she said again. “As soon as your knee is better, go back to doing what you love. Until then, you can teach me to fight like a SEAL. When you leave, you’ll know that I’ll be able to take care of myself, because I learned from the best.”

“Flattery won’t help, Chrissie.”

“Please.” She glanced at the door and tightened her hold on her sister. “I need you.”

Ah, hell.

“Fine, but—”

“Your rules,” she said with a triumphant smile. “I know.”

Which includes steering clear of your bed.

If he didn’t, if he ended up back in her room and spent another night on her freaking loveseat, he couldn’t guarantee his heart would survive this mission. And he couldn’t protect the people who needed him—including America’s country sweetheart—if he

was distracted by desire. The job had to come first. Always.

His phone rang. He looked down at the screen and saw Ronan's name. He answered the call and started talking, filling in his teammate. Mason burst into the room moments later, followed by a member of Las Vegas's finest. And Dante didn't have another minute to focus on the fact that he'd agreed to spend the rest of his leave teaching a country starlet how to fight like a SEAL.

Chapter Eight

I'm not going to die of boredom, that's for damn sure.

Dante stared into the hallway, his brain temporarily misfiring. Part of him wanted to drag the woman on the other side of the door into his room. And the other...hell, he wasn't sure if his common sense had made the trip to Portland.

The Chrissie Tate tour had packed up and left Vegas yesterday. Dante had flown with the star herself and Mason, her manager, to Oregon for the next show. The crew would follow with the gear, arriving in time for tomorrow night's concert. And against Dante's recommendation, Chrissie's mother and little sister would also be joining them for not only tomorrow's show, but for the rest of the West Coast leg of Chrissie Tate's national tour.

Dante had been in his hotel room for all of ten minutes before he heard a knock. And then he'd opened the door...

"I thought I told you to stay in your room." He growled at the woman determined to drag him around the country. But hell, if she showed up dressed like this at every stop, it might be worth it. If he wasn't responsible for her safety, he'd probably welcome her in and toss aside his plans to avoid flings—in Vegas or anywhere else.

“Don’t worry.” Chrissie brushed the strands on her Morticia Addams wig over her shoulder and walked into the room. “No one recognized me.”

But he’d bet damn near anything they’d seen and remembered her. Because, instead of matching the long black-haired wig with a conservative dress, she’d opted for a black tutu, a skintight off-the-shoulder black shirt, fishnet stockings, and knee-high black patent leather boots with skyscraper stiletto heels. A worn black backpack completed the outfit.

Country music’s current sweetheart looked like she was dressed for a stripper’s funeral. Sure, it covered more of her gorgeous body than the maid outfit, but not much.

“How many people saw you like this?” he demanded. And were they male?

“A couple of guys in the elevator.” She shrugged. “They didn’t even give me a second glance. This is my punk rock disguise. And that’s big here.”

Dante didn’t give a damn what she called her outfit. It was sexy as hell. Those guys in the elevator? They were probably dreaming about her boots—while stroking one off.

“So you rotate through these getups?” he said. If she’d worn that maid outfit beyond her hotel room...

“Don’t worry,” she said. “The French maid outfit was just for you. The other night, well, I thought you were leaving. And before you went...”

“You wanted to try your hand at seduction?” he supplied.

“Yes. But I lied about needing help with disguises. Ever since the tour launched, I’ve

been using different wigs and outfits when I don't want to deal with fans. It doesn't help when they run at me with a knife. But in an elevator? The wigs work like a charm."

He closed the door and silently swore he wouldn't fantasize about her boots, her legs, or any other piece of her after he returned her to the hotel's presidential suite.

But, as soon as he turned to face her, he knew he'd break his own promise. Chrissie was perched on the edge of his bed, bent at the waist as she unzipped her right boot.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

“Chrissie, what are you doing here? If you needed me, why didn’t you call?”

“I want to start our lessons.” She kicked off the first boot and began unzipping the second. “Your room is better than mine. People are always knocking on my door. This way we can focus.”

She stood and pulled off the wig. Her long blond ponytail unraveled and fell down her back.

“Lessons.” Dante took in the walking, talking fantasy in his room. Short skirt. Stockings. All-American freckles dotting her face as if she’d spent the day out in the sun before dressing to drive him insane. And yeah, he was hard as a fucking rock. The only lesson he wanted to give involved her skirt around her waist and the bed.

“My Navy SEAL lessons.” She picked up her black backpack. “Let me change, and then we’ll start.”

Dante nodded. If he opened his mouth, he’d probably ask her to keep on the skirt and stockings. He’d never met a Navy SEAL who trained for hand-to-hand combat in fishnets, but...

The bathroom door clicked shut, and he stared at the brass knob. He began counting backward from one hundred and hoping like hell his physical reaction subsided before she opened the door. He hit fifty, his dick still begging to be released from his jeans, when the door opened.

She’d traded the off-the-shoulder shirt for a fitted tank and sports bra. And in place of

the skirt? Running shorts. It didn't come close to a fantasy getup. But Dante had a feeling his X-rated daydreams were about to change.

And teaching Chrissie to fight? That gave a new definition to the term "Hell Week." Because the minute he touched her again, the second he felt her bare skin, he would harden. By the time he had transformed country's version of a Disney princess into a SEAL, his balls would be blue.

She placed her hands on her hips and looked at him wearing a mask of freckle-faced determination. "Where do we start?"

Change back into that outfit with the fishnet stockings and climb on the bed. Let me lick you again...

Dante crossed his arms in front of his chest and forced himself to focus.

"There are two basic rules in hand-to-hand combat. Hit hard and haul ass."

She nodded. "I can do that."

"Can you?" He raised an eyebrow. He'd witnessed sailors entering BUD/S, the elite Navy SEAL training program, who held back when sparring with an "attacker." And nine times out ten, they lost the fight. "When you strike another person, you need to commit to it. Aim for a vulnerable spot, and don't hold back."

"I won't," she assured him. "Tell me whe

re and how, and I'll hit you hard."

The blood powering his train of thought headed south. He knew she hadn't meant those words as a come-on. But the thought of her pressing him up against the wall,

taking a swing at him, yeah, it turned him on. Any excuse to touch her...

“It’s your right,” he continued, struggling to regain his footing in the lesson. “Not to be attacked or hurt by another person. Remember that and hit hard. Then, if you see an opportunity, haul ass. Hell, if you have the chance to run before your opponent attacks, take it and—”

“Haul ass. I got it.”

“But if you do need to strike,” he said, moving his feet hip width apart and preparing to launch at her. “Focus on the face and neck. The nose and windpipe are always safe bets.” He took a step forward. “Now come at me.”

She launched across the room, and her fist connected with his neck. Not hard. She’d held back. And it helped that he hadn’t put up much effort to fight her off. Most of the men likely to attack her wouldn’t have his training or ability to play defense. So he’d let her land the hit before catching her right wrist in his hand.

“Not bad,” he said, gasping for air. “But you could try harder.”

“Harder?” she repeated, stepping back and pulling free from his hold.

He nodded and shifted his weight to the balls of his feet. She caught on fast, and he didn’t want to make this too easy for her. Plus, he was rested and ready for a little PT. Ronan had taken over protection duty for the past twenty-four hours. Then his teammate had driven back to Coronado. And Dante, still on freaking medical leave, had boarded a plane to wet, rainy Oregon.

But right now medical leave isn’t looking so bad.

Chrissie came at him again, and this time he caught her fist before she landed a jab on

his windpipe.

“Better,” he said, holding tight to her hand. He wanted to keep her close, and his reasons didn’t have a damn thing to do with SEAL training. “But you should try hitting like a girl.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Are you sure you’re a fully qualified SEAL?”

He laughed. “Yeah. Remember the way I broke your stalker’s nose?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

She nodded, and her muscles relaxed. But she didn't withdraw her hand.

"A powerful hit with an open palm hurts like hell," he continued. "Your hand contains the densest bone in your body. Now it might not have as big an impact when slapped against your thigh, but—"

"Like this?" she murmured smacking her hand against his uninjured leg.

It was a playful swat, delivered close enough to his groin to send an altogether different message. His cock perked up and rose to attention as if she'd issued an invitation.

"Yeah," he said, his voice gruff. "But harder."

"That's your answer to everything, isn't it? Harder?"

"Unless you're hauling ass, yeah it is."

She stepped closer. "I'm not running away. I want to try again."

"I should warn you, I'm going to defend myself," he murmured.

She nodded and stepped back again.

I can't take much more of this.

He wanted to pull her close, kiss those full lips, and take her to his bed. He wanted to

touch her, taste her, and bury himself inside her—

“Shit,” he said, capturing her wrist a split second before she landed a powerful hit against his windpipe. Instead of mentally stripping off her tank top and sports bra, he needed to pay attention or risk an injury that might sideline him for the night.

“That was close,” he murmured. “Someone else, with less training, would be on the floor fighting to breathe. And when that happens, you—”

“Haul ass.” She smiled. “I know. But if I end up here, caught by my opponent, am I supposed to do this?”

She shifted her body closer and raised her free hand. Her palm brushed his jaw. Her touch was soft, sweet, and unlike any assailant he’d ever encountered. She moved her fingers through his hair. She rose up on her toes and pressed a kiss to his lips. Then, maintaining her hold on him, she drew back.

“No, honey,” he said, his voice rough with wanting. Another hit, another touch, another kiss—he’d take it all. “Do that and you’re asking for a whole world of trouble.”

...

Chrissie stared up at her combat instructor. She wanted to learn self-defense. She’d been glancing over her shoulder ever since the incident after her concert. Knowing she would find a way to come out on top, that a U.S. Navy SEAL would train her—while also watching out for her—was the only thing that had helped her through the long interview with the police.

Her mother had arrived on the scene not long after her manager. Her momma had made a fuss, demanding more security, more from the police, more, more, more. Ever

since Chrissie started making money, her mother had developed a fascination with more.

After listing her demands to anyone who would listen, her mother had led Melissa away. Chrissie hated the fact that her little sister was safer somewhere else, away from her. But facing that sad truth had also strengthened her resolve. She would demand that Dante teach her everything he knew. By the time he went back to the job he loved, she wouldn't need hired muscle. At least not for her peace of mind. Her manager had made it crystal clear that "bodyguard" would be a line item on her budget moving forward.

Chrissie had walked into the room determined. So why was she sabotaging her first lesson?

Because she wanted another night with the man who'd made her scream with pleasure and then tucked her into bed without asking for anything in return. Her mother wasn't the only one who wanted more from Chrissie's fame. But what Chrissie wanted didn't come with a price tag. His hands on her, his lips claiming hers, his body pressed up against her, his mouth delivering another orgasm...

One kiss on-camera, one failed seduction, a wild rescue, and a few conversations? That was the closest she'd come to a relationship in years. She'd been on the road or in a recording studio giving her music her all. She hadn't looked for a friend, a boyfriend, or a lover. She'd worked.

And then Dante had walked into her life. He'd given her a treat, a break, a taste of sex, without asking for anything. Everyone needed something from her. But not Dante.

She liked him. She trusted him. She respected him. And she wanted him. Plus, he was leaving in a few weeks. The job he loved demanded that he return to duty. They

weren't looking at a potential long-term relationship that would probably implode due to her demanding career. Look at her parents. They barely spent any time together anymore due to the tour schedule and her need to record a new album.

But until he left, until Dante disappeared from her life and returned to his team...

"What kind of trouble?" she asked, stepping closer. She stood with her feet hip-distance apart and straddled his good leg. She rocked her hips and pressed up against the hard length she wanted to feel in her hands and explore with her lips.

Dante stared down at her. "A kiss might give your opponent the impression you want something like this." He lowered his mouth to her neck.

"I do," she murmured, closing her eyes.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

She leaned her head back and arched her spine—a silent plea for more. His hands obeyed and ran up her sides. But this time, he didn't brush past her breasts. His fingers glided around the front of her tank top and teased her nipples through her clothes.

Stupid, stupid sports bra!

He pulled back from her neck and stared down at her chest. And she opened her eyes, her lips parted, her body on fire with need. He cupped her breasts in his palms and tested the weight through the layers of clothing.

Oh God, yes...more...

Could she come just like this? Fully clothed? With his hands on her breasts, her hips rocking back and forth against his thigh? Probably not. But she was willing to give it a shot.

He looked up, his brow furrowed, and his hands abandoned her breasts in favor of her hips. His tight grip stilled he

r needy movements.

I certainly can't come like this.

"I think we're moving on to a different type of lesson," he said. The sound of his low voice rivaled his touch, and she reconsidered her impending orgasm.

“I’m on familiar ground here. Aside from the other night, it’s been a while. A long, long while—”

He gave a growl of approval as if he liked the idea that she’d been waiting for him. Her lips curled up, and she reached for the hem of his gray Navy T-shirt and drew it up to take a peek at his abs.

“But I think I remember,” she added, lifting his shirt still higher.

He released her hips and caught her wrists in his hands. The T-shirt was playing peek-a-boo with his pecs, and she wanted to see more.

“We shouldn’t,” he said. “I work for you.”

She met his concerned gaze. “I promise I won’t fire you for a sub-par performance.”

He raised an eyebrow, and she knew he’d take the bait. “Honey, if we do this, you’ll walk out of this room satisfied.”

Keep looking at me like that, and I might explode from anticipation.

“If you don’t curl up on my bed and pass out,” he continued. “But—”

“No buts,” she said. “You’ve already given me an orgasm that left me more relaxed than I’ve been in a long, long time. Let’s see if I can return the favor.”

He released her wrists. A lock of his dark, wavy hair fell down over his forehead as he leaned closer. His hands cupped her jaw, mimicking her earlier movements, as his fingers wove through her hair, still bound in a ponytail. He lowered his mouth to hers and captured her lips.

And this time, he didn't start slowly. He instantly deepened the kiss. He wasn't holding anything back. This wasn't part of the show. No one was watching.

Just me and my Navy SEAL...

Her tongue tangled with his, and she reached for the button on his jeans. Her fingers worked quickly and then moved on to the zipper and drew it down. Resisting the urge to reach inside, she returned to his waistband and pushed his pants down to his thighs.

Her hand touched cotton, and she groaned into his kiss. She'd hoped he would be commando beneath his jeans. Instead, she had one more layer to contend with before she had him naked and at her mercy. The longer it took to strip off his clothes, the more opportunities he'd have to offer up another excuse. And some might hit too close to home.

She could ignore the fact that he worked for her. They were consenting adults, weren't they? But if she thought too long about the fact that her career demanded traveling from one city to the next while his involved fighting in places that weren't exactly known for their love of country music...

One night. A treat for herself with a man who would be walking out of her life the next day—that was one thing. But fooling around a second time with the bodyguard who would be spending the next week or two on tour with her?

Might be a bad idea...

She pulled back from the kiss, hooked her thumbs in the elastic band of his white briefs, and pulled them down, down, down. She sank to the floor, and her knees pressed into the hotel room carpet.

Oh, wow. I was wrong. This is a very good plan.

She'd never have another man like this at her mercy, in her room.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

With his jeans and underwear decorating his lower legs, every thick, hard inch of him was on display. She placed her hands on his thighs. From her position—eye level with his erection—it looked as if every part of her Navy SEAL was supersized, from his biceps right on down to his cock.

This U.S. Navy SEAL was perfect, from his erection to his commitment to his country. And the latter, the way he'd spoken about his desire to serve until he physically couldn't do the job, meant they would hit a dead end eventually. She wouldn't need to choose between her career and him—and neither would he.

She ran her right hand up his leg and wrapped it around him. Gently, enjoying the feel of his warm, soft skin against hers, she pulled upward. When she reached the head, she released the pressure and drew her hand back down to the base.

“Chrissie,” he said, reaching for her. His palm brushed her cheek. But he stopped short of drawing her mouth to his cock. “Honey.”

Oh no, she wasn't done with him yet. She leaned forward and ran her tongue up from her hand to the tip of his erection. And then she wrapped her mouth around him.

For a second, she felt him tense, and she wondered if she'd done something wrong. But then he groaned, and the deep, rumbling sound filled the room. She raised her hand up to meet her lips as her tongue swirled around the head. She drew her hand down again and teased the slit, tasting him.

“Chrissie,” he tried again. She glanced up, her mouth still swallowing him. He looked down at her, his dark eyes on fire with desire.

Or maybe she'd read him wrong, because the next second, he cupped her cheeks and tried to guide her mouth away from him.

"I have one problem," he said.

She cocked her head. "Please don't tell me I found the one SEAL who hates blow jobs."

He laughed. "No. I fucking love what you're doing. Let's be clear about that, but—"

She pumped his cock and watched as his jaw tightened. "I'll fire you again and rehire you after, but I'm not walking away."

"Yeah, that's not it." He reached out and traced a path across the bare skin just above her tank top. His fingertips dipped below the neckline and grazed the swell of her breast. "You're still dressed. And that's just plain unfair."

"And SEALs always play fair?" she murmured, her hand moving faster, up and down his hard length.

A heartbeat later, he had his hands around her waist. He'd caught her by surprise, and she released his cock rather than fight to maintain her position. Then he lifted her with ease, turned, and tossed her on the bed. She landed on her back.

"No, we don't." He pressed one knee at her side into the bed as he reached for her shorts. He stripped them off, along with her panties, in one swift movement. "Consider that lesson number two."

Chapter Nine

If given the choice, Dante would rather sit in freezing cold water all night like he'd

done during Hell Week than pull her mouth away from his cock again. It had been a long time since a woman had serviced him that way—or hell, any way. But he didn't want to come first tonight or any other night.

Before he mimicked her performance in Vegas and passed out from pleasure, which, shit, just might happen, given her talented touch, he wanted to hear her cry out as she fell apart.

“You want to play dirty?” she asked as she planted her feet on the bed. She let her knees fall open. Her legs formed a diamond shape on the bed, offering him one helluva view. Her legs were bare, but blond curls covered the space between them. She might possess a body to rival a teen pop princess, but Chrissie was 100 percent woman.

She's so flexible... The things I could do with her...

If their “lessons” continued...

And she wanted to transition to naked combat...

“Yeah,” he managed, his gaze still fixed between her legs. “I want to play dirty. And wet.”

“Maybe a little rough?” she murmured.

He looked up and saw the question in her blue eyes. He'd been desperate to get her on the bed. He'd tossed her down onto the hotel blanket. But rough sex? That had never turned him on.

“Wild, honey.” He leaned forward, and his good knee pressed into the mattress. He placed one hand on the bed and used the other to pull up her shirt. “I'm going to drive

you wild and worship you from head to toe.”

She nodded and curled up to allow him to wrestle her out of her top and bra.

He tossed her clothes aside and reached for her breasts. “And I’m going to start right here.” He lowered his mouth to her chest. His tongue glided over the swell of her full breast and swirled a circle around her nipple. Then he wrapped his lips around the tight peak and sucked hard.

Her moans tempted him to stay right there. But he had plans for the blond curls between her splayed legs. She arched her low back as he moved south, but her knees remained flat against the mattress.

Page 26

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

His hands glided down her thighs and gently pressed them farther apart. But there wasn't space for him on the bed, and he slid off the end. He caught himself before his injured knee came down hard on the carpet. Slowly, he lowered to the floor.

But the woman who'd been writhing and moaning seconds earlier sat up. "Your knee—"

"My knee is telling me to bury my face between your legs. I've been damn near dying to taste you again." He ran his hand up her thighs until his fingers brushed the place he planned to lick over and over. His thumb touched her clit, and she fell back against the mattress.

He smiled as he lowered his mouth. His tongue followed his thumb and teased the place designed to push her over the edge.

"Dante," she hissed.

He glanced up. She had one arm flung over her eyes. Her other hand, the one she'd hit him with earlier, clutched at the bedding.

"Honey," he murmured. "This is the best damn combat lesson I've ever had the pleasure of attending."

...

Her bodyguard-turned-instructor-turned-lover lowered his mouth and proceeded to lick, suck, and oh God...worship her. Yes, he had his face buried between her legs,

but she felt it from head to toe.

“Dante,” she screamed. “Mmm, more please... Oh God yes! Right there! And don’t stop.”

His tongue pulled back as he chuckled.

“No,” she hissed. “Don’t stop. That’s an order.”

He followed her command like a good Navy SEAL. His tongue returned to her clit. And, bless the man, he ran his hand up her leg. He teased her entrance and then slipped a finger inside.

And she tumbled into another chart-topping orgasm. But oh, this one...it was an all-time greatest hit. A classic. The one she swore she’d remember forever as Oh God, Dante.

She surfaced from the pleasure dimly aware that he’d pulled back. Opening her eyes, she spotted him standing at the foot of the bed staring down at her. Her gaze traveled down his body.

“You’re still awake,” he said. “Maybe I should try again?”

“No, I think it’s time for me to finish what I started,” she murmured as she pushed her upper body off the mattress. She scooted to the edge of the

bed and reached for him. “I think I was right here, using my hand...”

Her fingers closed around his cock. She looked up and saw the strained expression on his face. He’d been kneeling and then standing. Was his knee aching?

Her hand reached the tip, but then she paused. "Is your knee bothering you? Do you need to sit down?"

"No." He wrapped his hand around hers. "I want it harder. Faster."

She watched as his grip tightened around hers and drew her fingers down his hard length and then back up. His hips began to pump, and they increased in velocity each time. She studied the movements, memorizing how he liked to be touched, just in case there was a next time.

"Like that, honey," he said, his tone rough as his guiding hand fell away. "Don't be afraid that you'll hurt me."

Oh yes, she wanted more than tonight with him. Another few lessons...some naked...

"Tighten your grip at the top," he murmured, thrusting into her.

"Like this?" she asked.

"Yes." He gasped. "That's fucking perfect."

He groaned, and her eyes widened as he exploded. His hips stopped pumping into her now wet hand.

"Now, I need to sit down," he murmured and stepped back. He disappeared into the bathroom and returned with a hand towel, which he held out to her. Then he claimed a space beside her on the bed.

"We probably shouldn't have done that," he said.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

“I learned a lot.”

He let out a laugh and shook his head. “If you end up naked and enjoying it, trust me, you’re not in a combat situation.”

“I got distracted.” She stood and stared. “But I’m going to need more SEAL lessons. I have a feeling we have a lot of ground to cover.”

His expression turned serious. “You know I’m heading back to work as soon as I’m cleared.”

“And I have a tour to finish, plus a new album to launch.” She pulled on her shorts. “But until then?”

He pushed himself up off the bed. “Yeah, until then, I’m yours.”

I’m yours.

Chrissie heard those words over and over as if they’d been set to repeat. Until he could return to the job he loved, he was hers. Her bodyguard. Her teacher. Her lover.

For now.

She understood passion and drive. And she admired his desire to serve. No, she’d never want to take him away from that. Even if it meant having all of his love and loyalty focused on her.

Even if he offers his heart and commitment, it will probably shatter under the weight of my career—and his.

“I’ll walk you back to your room.” He reached for his jeans. “And this time, I’m staying in your suite until it’s time for you to report to the stage. No more wandering alone in crazy outfits.”

“I think you might change your mind about the outfits,” she said as she picked up her backpack and headed for the door. “You haven’t seen my librarian’s costume yet.”

He pulled on his shirt and then picked up his key off the desk. “I bet you blend right in.”

“Your father’s coming.”

Chrissie stepped back. Her calves bumped into the greenroom couch, and she sank down onto the cushions. She glanced at Dante standing guard by the door. Before her mother had burst into the room, she’d been wondering which disguise to wear to his room later that night.

Naughty librarian? She had a fake pair of wire glasses and a brown wig that might work for that outfit. Or sexy schoolgirl? She’d caught him staring at her legs when she’d exited the stage in Portland wearing one of her tiny sequined dresses. She needed to buy the knee-high stockings, and she might draw some strange looks in the elevator—this was Salt Lake City, after all, not liberal Portland—but it would probably be worth it. As long as no one recognized her.

But then her mother burst in and, as if she could read her daughter’s mind, announced her father’s arrival.

I hope she doesn’t have a window into my imagination. If she did, she’d know I’ve

been picturing Dante naked and on top of me after our next lesson.

Between the show in Portland, packing up, and riding on the buses with the rest of the crew to Utah, there hadn't been enough time or privacy to practice her SEAL skills. But privacy might be scarce with her entire family joining the tour...

"He's bringing the twins?" she asked.

"No, they're spending the rest of spring break at Disney World with some friends and their families." Her mother headed for the coffeemaker.

Oh no, she doesn't need more caffeine.

A second later, Melissa skipped into the room and headed for Dante. He broke into a wide smile and gave her little sister a high five. Then he leaned over and whispered something in her ear.

"Cookies!" Melissa cried, her eyes widening as she scanned the room and spotted the platter on the catering table. She raced over and selected a chocolate chip.

"I told your father to fly out," her mother said, turning to face Chrissie with a Styrofoam cup clutched in her hand. "If I didn't, he'd spend the next five days at home feeling sorry for himself instead of helping here, where he's needed."

Chrissie nodded. But unlike her mother, she didn't hold her dad's prolonged grief against him. He'd lost his son. And the death had crushed him. Plus, one more parent trying to guide her career from the sidelines sounded like a recipe for disaster, not "help." She knew her mother believed they should pitch in and do their part to steer the career that supported the entire family.

"Mom, go easy on him," she said as Melissa settled down beside her on the sofa.

Chrissie held out her hand. Her little sister broke her cookie in half and then deposited the smaller piece in Chrissie's palm.

"I want to help him," her mother said, her tone defensive.

Chrissie bit into the cookie instead of screaming Then take care of him! Love him like you did before.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

Her parents had married their senior year of high school. And her big brother Joe had arrived six months later. She'd never doubted her parents' love. She'd avoided most of the goons in her small town because she'd wanted what her parents had one day—a picture-perfect love.

But the frame holding that fairy-tale image cracked when her brother died. And it shattered when she started touring, her hit song climbing the charts. It was as if they'd been holding their marriage together with a shoestring while they focused on launching her career. But when she reached the peak labeled “success,” they'd started tossing out sharp words and pulling apart...and she remained in the center.

“I’m trying,” her mother continued. “If your father would just put forth some effort.”

“Mom—”

“Don’t worry, Chrissie.” Her momma forced a smile. “We’ll present a unified front for your shows and the press. We know how important this is to you.”

She nodded and wrapped her arm around Melissa. Telling her mom that she didn’t want them to pretend to love each other like they once had, that she wanted them to feel it, wouldn’t help. Plus, they’d already said enough in front of Melissa.

Hank poked his head into the greenroom. “Ready for your sound check, Ms. Tate?”

“Sure.” She released Melissa and headed for the door with her big, bad, orgasmic bodyguard at her heels. She glanced over at him. “Are your parents still together?”

He nodded as he scanned the corridor leading to the stage. “Yeah. They live in Brooklyn and run my grandfather’s restaurant. My sister is there, too.”

“They must be proud of you.”

“They are.” He looked at her. His mouth formed a thin line. “But they don’t interfere with my job.”

“Ever?” She couldn’t imagine running her music career without her mother’s involvement.

“Unless I’m injured,” he said. “My mom flew out for my surgery and stuck around to cook. But otherwise, they don’t insert themselves.”

“This is different,” she explained. “My family was ba

rely getting by before I landed my first record deal. My mom was a crossing guard for one of the local schools. But her hours had been cut. And my dad worked in the kitchen at one of the local restaurants. We got by on the extra money Joe sent home.” She stopped beside the metal stairs leading to the stage. Her hand held tight to the cold metal. “But they were happy. Now I think they’d be better off apart.”

“I think it’s hard to look inside a relationship and understand all the moving parts. Sometimes even for people in the marriage,” he said evenly.

But what if I’m to blame? They were happy, dammit—until my career took off.

“Only the two people in the relationship know if they still trust and love each other...”

She glanced at him. The look in his dark eyes was miles away from Salt Lake City.

“Do you still love her?” she asked softly. “Your ex?”

“No. But part of me feels like I should, because I promised to love her forever.”

“Even though she cheated on you?” she asked, incredulous.

“Yeah.” He paused at the base of the metal stairs. “You should probably get out there for the sound check. You don’t want to pay your crew to stand around, do you?”

“No.” She climbed the stairs and stared out into the auditorium that looked just like every other venue. Vegas. Portland. Salt Lake. They all looked the same from the stage.

She wrapped her arms around her middle and kept her gaze fixed on the empty seats. In the center of the space, she saw the audio technicians leaning over the sound console. It was a good thing Dante’s time on the tour came with an end date. If he stayed...if she fell for him... She didn’t think she could handle that kind of loyalty directed at her. Not when hers was focused on delivering a perfect performance to the people who would fill these seats tonight.

“Ready, Ms. Tate?” Hank called from the side of the stage. “We’ll start with you and then bring on the band.”

She nodded and headed for the mic stand the crew had positioned in the center of the stage. Holding the mic, Chrissie closed her eyes and began to sing a few bars of “How Do I Remember You?” to the empty seats. Her music. That was the one thing she could trust. These words that she’d written, recorded, and performed night after night. They were her security. Her everything.

Beyond that? She wasn’t sure anymore.

What about Dante?

She glanced at the side of the stage as she lowered the mic and waited for the band to join her. She could count on her SEAL for another lesson and, hopefully, another orgasm. But after that he had a job to do. And it was more important than anything she'd sing on this stage.

Chapter Ten

Dante sat on the edge of the hotel bed in his underwear and stared at the door to his Utah hotel, hoping the woman he'd been hired to protect would knock and demand a Navy SEAL combat lesson at two in the morning. If his team could see him now, torn up over a woman he'd known for a handful of days after he'd sworn off playing fast and loose with his heart...

But this is different.

Why? He barely knew her. Sure, she had a way of drawing truths out of him, like if he still loved his cheating ex and why he refused to quit serving his country. But that didn't mean he could trust her.

Does it matter if I do?

They both knew this was a dead end. She had enough on her plate, entertaining crowds night after night and supporting her family. That didn't mean he couldn't enjoy their remaining lessons. Hell, she might even learn something in the process. Though he sure as shit hoped her manager would hire decent security after he returned to the teams. He didn't want to think about Chrissie facing another knife-wielding fan while trying to decide if she should hit hard or haul ass.

But I can't keep her safe forever. I can't follow her forever.

Still, he could have her tonight. He could leave her with another skill and maybe something more—if she made the trip across the hall and knocked on his door.

He flopped back on the bed and covered his face with his arm. Logic demanded that he face facts. She was probably asleep. She wasn't coming tonight, which meant he wasn't, either. He was done stroking himself to a half-assed orgasm while picturing America's country sweetheart. He wanted to feel her, touch her, and make her scream his name as she came.

"Tomorrow I'll offer her a lesson," he murmured to the empty room. It wasn't like he had anything to lose. If she shot him down, well hell, he'd be back where he belonged soon enough, far away from a world filled with songs about trucks, beer, and shit—sex.

...

Chrissie opened the door to her suite and found the hallway empty. Finally. She'd been checking every fifteen minutes for the last hour. First, she'd spotted her mother leading her dad to their shared room next door to hers. And she'd quickly pulled her head back into her room. She would welcome her father in the morning. Right now, she wanted to give her parents space.

And she didn't want to explain to her father why she'd changed out of her pajamas and into a pencil skirt, heels, and button-down white shirt. Sure, she wore shorter costumes during her concerts. This disguise probably wouldn't have the same heart-attack inducing effect of the schoolgirl outfit she'd ordered for a future "combat" lesson.

But if she left her room wearing fake glasses and tight-fitting business clothes in the middle of the night and told her family, her manager, or even one of her band members that she was sneaking out for a training session with the SEAL down the hall, they would jump to conclusions. And if they found out, her manager would want to use the relationship to promote her upcoming music video. Her mother would wish to discuss the pros and cons of her starlet daughter dating Dante. As for the rest of the

band, she didn't care if they assumed she wanted more than a hand-to-hand combat session, that she wanted to seduce her bodyguard.

But she wasn't ready to share her relationship with Dante. This was for her. It wasn't a publicity stunt or a way to further her career. And it wasn't up for discussion, not with her manager or her mother. She just wanted to slip into the make-believe world where nothing, including her career and her family, could intrude.

So she'd waited. Now, at two in the morning, the corridor was clear. Her hotel room door clicked shut behind her, and she rushed across to Dante's door.

She knocked once and...nothing.

"Dante," she hissed, and knocked a second time. She heard footsteps and hoped he would let her in soon. She raised her hand to knock a third time as the door swung open.

"Chrissie?" He blinked as if shifting from asleep to alert and ready for action—and oh my. He was wearing his bright white undies. "What's wrong?" he demanded.

She placed a hand on his bare chest. Her fingers tangled with the dark hairs as she pushed past him and slipped into his room. "I'm ready for my next SEAL lesson."

Dante closed the door and turned to face her. He placed his hands on the elastic band of his white underwear. On another man, the tight white underpants might appear silly.

But he looked like Superman. Or maybe super SEAL.

"You got all dressed up in the middle of the night to learn how to defend yourself again?"

She pressed her thighs together at the sound of his stern tone.

“Not just defend,” she said, trying for bold. But the words came out breathless and so heavy with wanting that she might as well have worn a T-shirt with the words “Take Me Sailor” in red sequin letters. “I want to learn how to attack, too.”

Tension rippled through his body. “I didn’t think you were coming tonight. And now you’re going to seduce me again?”

She nodded. “This time, I’m going to succeed.”

“Maybe. But not here,” he said, walking past her. “We need more space.”

He left the narrow hotel entryway and headed for the bedroom. And she followed. His room mirrored hers. A king-size bed dominated the space flanked by tan nightstands. To the right, a door led to the bathroom. Unlike the five-star hotel that hosted their four-night stop in Las Vegas, one night in Utah didn’t come with a suite upgrade for her or her bodyguard.

He walked over to the bathroom door and pulled it shut. A full-length mirror stood on the other side. Then he headed for the foot of the bed. “Come over here. Stand in front of me and face the mirror.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

“Should I change first?” she asked as she followed his instructions.

His lips brushed the nape of her neck. “No. You look great like this. What do you call this one?”

“Librarian.”

“Next lesson, remind me to teach you about blending in.” His hands moved to her hips. “I don’t think Utah’s librarian population is roaming hotels in the middle of the night dressed in tight skirts.”

“Do you know a lot about Salt Lake City librarians?” she challenged. She kept her gaze fixed on the mirror. In the reflection, she saw his lips hovering over her skin. Just a little bit lower and he’d be kissing her.

“No, but I have some experience with male fantasies,” he said.

“I wear disguises for privacy,” she said. “So no one will recognize me.”

“Sometimes,” he agreed. He lowered his mouth to her neck and gave her a gentle nip with his teeth. “And sometimes you wear them for me. You could have crossed the hotel hallway in your sweats.”

“Yes.” She gasped and raised her arms, reaching for him. She wanted to touch him, to reach back and draw his mouth down to the sensitive skin on her neck.

“Not too high,” he said. “You’ll want your hands positioned in front of your face for

this lesson. We're going to practice punching."

She lowered her arms and formed her hands into tight fists. "Like this?"

"That's a start," he said, running his hands up to her waist. "The important thing is to twist from the waist."

"Twist from the waist. I can do that."

?

?Let's try jabbing your right fist across your body," he said.

She executed the movement as his hands guided her waist into a twist.

"Not bad," he said. "But you dropped your left hand. This time keep it in front of your face for protection. Now try again."

She performed the same move. This time, his hands moved higher, gliding up her sides and over her white button-down shirt to her rib cage. His index finger brushed her breast, and she moaned into the punch.

"Careful you don't get distracted while trying to fend off your opponent," he murmured.

"But you—"

"Try again," he said firmly. "First a right jab and then a left. Picture someone you want to take out standing right in front of you. Like that jerk who's still singing in your show."

“Don’t tell me you’re jealous of Jared,” she said. “I asked Mason to fire him, but he claimed we couldn’t find a decent replacement for the same salary.”

“Honey, I’m not jealous. I know how to kiss you.” He pressed his lips to her neck as if offering proof. “Now, jab.”

She threw one punch after another. Her first looked on target. And her second. But by the third, her instructor’s hands drifted lower, moving over her hips. She felt his fingers pulling at her skirt. And the fabric rose, brushing against her bare legs.

Her arms stilled and lowered.

“Don’t let down your guard,” he warned. “Keep jabbing.”

“What are you doing?” she demanded as he lifted her skirt higher.

“Testing to see if you can work with distractions. Most fights happen in crowded places. Lots of noise.”

“Pulling up my skirt doesn’t cause a racket,” she muttered, out of breath from punching the air.

“Just wait.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

His hands glided over the top of her black silk panties, which were visible in the bathroom door mirror now that he'd pulled her skirt to her waist. His fingers slipped beneath the elastic band, and he didn't stop until he'd found her clit.

"Keep punching," he reminded her as he drew a small circle over the bundle of nerves.

"I..." She stepped her feet apart, offering him access as she halfheartedly threw another jab. Her hips began to rock toward him.

"Focus," he whispered as his other hand released her waist. She felt his fingers in her hair pulling at the pins. He tossed them to the ground as her long locks tumbled over her shoulders.

"I can't," she said, reaching behind her. She pressed her palms into his bare thighs and clawed at him, begging him to move forward. He guided her hips back, using the hand still buried in her underwear and teasing her mercilessly. She felt the hard ridge of his erection against her.

"After you come," he said. "I'm going to bury myself inside of you."

"Tonight?" she gasped as he quickened his circles, pushing her closer and closer to the big O finish line.

"Tonight. But first, I'm going to strip you out of this costume." He growled. "I like your disguises. But I've decided that when I take you, when I let you seduce me—"

She let out a laugh that transformed to a moan. Her plans to seduce her big bad alpha SEAL consistently ended in failure—and orgasms.

“When I fuck you,” he continued, his voice raw and open, “I want you. Not a sexy maid or a wild librarian. Just you, Chrissie.”

She came hard and fast. Her fingers dug in to his legs and she let out a low, guttural sound. If he were an opponent, she would have lost this round. But she didn’t care.

Slowly, the pleasure ebbed, and she opened her eyes. One look in the mirror and she saw the heat in his gaze.

“Your turn,” she said.

“Our turn,” he corrected.

He released her and stepped back. Keeping her gaze fixed on the mirror, she saw him move to the foot of the king-size bed. He sat on the edge with his feet planted on the floor and his palms flat on the bedspread. Even free from the tension that rippled through his muscles when he was poised to defend or fight, he looked bigger and better than any man she’d ever seen.

A SEAL. The best of the best. Stronger... Harder...

But also a man.

“Time to kiss the librarian disguise good-bye,” he said.

“Are you sure?” She thought back to that first night when he’d worked around the French maid outfit. “I could keep the skirt on and we could pretend—”

“That I found you in the stacks and wanted to beg you to forgive my overdue fines?” he said. “Not tonight, honey. I want you, not the show you put on for the rest of the world.”

But plain old Chrissie from Florida, the girl drowning in grief and fear for her family—that girl wouldn’t have a clue how to seduce a SEAL. “I’m not sure that girl belongs in this bedroom,” she murmured. “Trying to talk you out of your underwear. She doesn’t have experience luring a...a man like you into bed.”

“I’m already on the bed, honey. But if you’re going to join me, please do it because you want me, not my job or the thrill that comes with bedding a SEAL.”

“No, it’s not like that. I do want you,” she said firmly. She reached for the buttons on her shirt and began freeing them one by one. As her fingers moved, she kept her gaze fixed on him.

That first night, when she’d brazenly walked out of her bedroom in a maid’s outfit, she’d been looking for a treat. One night with a SEAL. She’d craved the fantasy and the escape. But tonight, she wanted Dante, the man who looked at her as if she was enough. He didn’t need the sequins and the number one hits. He wasn’t here for her music.

Plus, he was leaving soon. This wasn’t permanent. She didn’t need to find a way to work his crazy schedule into hers—and wait for the moment her career poisoned their relationship.

“Chrissie?” he asked mildly.

Her fingers stilled on the last button. “You know this doesn’t go beyond our lessons?”

He nodded. “I know. But honey, the way I see tonight, it’s like jumping out of a helicopter. If you pause and think long and hard about all the things that could go wrong, or where you’ll land, like in the middle of the freaking ocean, you’d never jump. And you’d be missing out, because the fall is worth it.”

That look in his dark eyes? That hunger when he spoke about falling through the sky? It felt real and solid like the lyrics to her songs. The man on the bed wanted her, not the fantasy. He wanted to take the leap with her regardless of where they’d end up.

She pulled her now-unbuttoned shirt free from her skirt, stripped it off, and tossed it aside. Then she released the clasp on her bra, drew the straps down her shoulders, and tossed it in the other direction. “Sorry, I’m not giving you much of a show.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

“When a beautiful woman starts taking off her clothes, I’m not stupid enough to critique her method,” he said, his gaze fixed on her bare breasts. “This isn’t part of your lessons, honey. Because trust me, I’m going to make damn sure you have the skills to fend off an attacker fully dressed.”

She reached for her skirt, still bunched at her waist, and wrestled with the zipper. “So I don’t have the ‘How to Striptease In Front of the Bad Guys’ lesson to look forward to?”

“No. You keep your clothes on in front of your enemies. But you want the secret to getting naked like a SEAL?”

She nodded as she pushed her skirt down over her hips. It fell to the floor at her feet. She stepped out, which left her in low heels and her black silk underwear.

“Fast,” he said.

She kicked off her shoes.

“Good. Now please, take off your panties and get on the bed. Every second that you draw this out? It’s pure torture. The best kind. But I can’t take much more.”

She hooked her thumbs in the elastic band. “I’ll take mine off if you lose yours.”

He stood and removed his briefs. His long, thick cock stood ready and waiting for her. She followed his lead and tossed her panties aside. But she kept her gaze fixed on him.

/> I did it. I seduced the SEAL.

And now she got to claim her prize. The man who wanted her. Just her.

Chapter Eleven

Dante stood naked in the hotel room and stared at the woman who'd won over legions of fans. He felt like a fool opening up to her and telling her that he didn't want to pretend anymore. But the SEAL and the French maid, the bodyguard and the star, the teacher and the librarian—those sexy-as-hell scenarios all led to meaningless sex. And he'd promised himself no more flings.

She could be the exception to the rule.

But Chrissie Tate, country sweetheart, deserved better. She shouldn't have to be someone else to climb into bed with him. Plus, this wasn't meaningless—not to him—even if it did come with an end date.

“Come here, honey.” He drew her into his arms and claimed her lips. He felt the give as her body melted against his. And he gently turned her and guided her movements until the back of her legs touched the bed. Then he drew back. “Lie down on the bed. On your back.”

Yeah, his words sounded like a command. But he liked calling the shots. He'd asked her to stop pretending, and he planned to do the same.

She turned, offering one helluva view of her perfect backside, and climbed up on the smooth surface of sheets and blankets. Then she rolled onto her back and stared up at him.

“Don't move.” He stepped back and turned to the bathroom door. “I need to get a

condom.”

Inside the bathroom, he moved quickly and rifled through his toiletries bag as if conducting a search. He didn't give a damn if his travel-sized shampoo bottle rolled away and he never saw it again. He needed that condom. Now. He couldn't leave her waiting too long. He didn't want her to start second-guessing herself.

Bingo! His hand closed around the plastic packet. He returned to the bedroom, tore open the packet, and covered himself.

Then he joined her on the bed. He placed his hands on her bare legs, spread her limbs, and settled himself between them. He leaned forward and placed his left elbow on the mattress. He wrapped his free hand around his cock and nudged at her entrance. And let out a low, needy moan.

Jesus.

He slid the head of his dick against her wet folds, not even an inch inside, and he was close to losing it. He hoped like hell she wasn't expecting a buffet of sexual positions designed to push that flexible little body of hers to the limits. Right now, he wanted her too damn much.

“I want you just like this. Straight up missionary.” He growled, staring down into her blue eyes. He rocked his hips forward and slid inside another inch. She moaned, and he pressed forward. She was so damn tight, and it had been a freaking long time for his eager dick. Too long. He wasn't going to last beyond the first few thrusts. “Sorry if this bores you to tears. Next time, you can ride me, or I'll take you from behind. But right now...I can't, honey.”

...

Chrissie didn't have a lot of experience with sex. But she knew that if missionary was his idea of boring, she might not survive another position.

"This..." She moaned, a low sound that began at her core and rippled up through her and momentarily erased her ability to speak.

"I'm not..." she began again. But then one of his hands slipped underneath and wrapped around her backside. He tilted her hips up and thrust deeper.

"Chrissie." He gasped.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

She looked up at his face. His brow was knit together as if he was concentrating as hard as he could. She swore he looked like a man who would give her the world if she asked. But what she wanted...what she needed...

“This isn’t...” she tried again. He drew back and buried his cock inside her. “Oh God!”

Her muscles clenched, and pleasure erased everything else. Her world narrowed to Dante. His hands...his cock...and the feeling that she wanted to stay right here, rushing, tumbling, and yes, falling headfirst into this orgasm.

He slammed into her one last time. Then he threw his head back and roared. The low, primitive sound felt like a caress designed to draw her pleasure out until he’d taken everything he needed.

Slowly, his chin lowered to his chest, and he stared down at her.

“You’re going to have to try harder,” she said, finally able to string the words together. His eyebrows shot up, but she pressed forward. “A lot harder. If you want to bore me while you’re inside of me.”

He laughed as he withdrew from her body. She felt his weight lift from the bed—disposing of the condom she’d guess—before sinking back down onto the mattress beside her. “Next time, honey, I’ll let you ride me until you’re bored out of your mind. If that doesn’t do it, we’ll try doggie style with you bent over a chair and holding on—”

“Why wait until next time?” she murmured. She didn’t want this moment cut short with empty promises. What if they didn’t get another night together? What if he was called back even though his knee wasn’t ready for active duty? No, she didn’t want to hold out hope that they could return to this moment, naked and in bed, the pretense of their “SEAL lessons” forgotten in favor of pleasure. She wanted more of Dante Raske—now.

She felt his body shift on the bed beside her. She turned her head and met his gaze. He’d rolled onto his side, and one of his powerful hands now cupped his chin, his elbow pressing into the mattress.

“My recovery time is good, but I’m just a guy,” he said.

“What? Your super SEAL powers don’t extend to your...”

He tipped his head back and laughed. And she felt her cheeks warm. He’d buried his cock inside her, and she couldn’t bring herself to say the word?

“No,” he said as he smiled down at her. “They don’t. This is the first ‘training session’ that has ever challenged my recovery time. Trust me, I’m damn happy about that.”

“Would you like to run some drills?” She pushed her upper body off the mattress. Those words—first and happy—inflated her courage. “With your instruction, I might be able to help you.”

He laughed again. “Honey, if you want to do a little PT, try some sit-ups or run a few miles. I can help, but I’m not sure I’m qualified to teach this.”

“Then tell me what you like.” She slid off the edge of the bed and knelt on the hotel room carpet. He rolled onto his back, and for a second, she worried that he’d call off

the lesson, that he'd had enough of her. But then, he shifted to the edge of the bed and rested his feet firmly on the floor. He leaned back on his elbows, his abs on display, and stared down at her.

“Wrap your hand around me and guide me between your lips.” He issued the order in a low, firm voice.

She moved between his legs. Her hands guided his thighs apart and made room for her. She trailed her fingers over his thigh, her gaze lingering on the red angry scar on his knee before following her fingers. Then she obeyed his instruction.

With her lips around his cock and her tongue teasing the head, she glanced up.

Tell me what to do next.

She was out of her element. Her lack of experience with seduction, with men, with blow jobs...suddenly seemed acute.

“Run your lips down to meet your hand,” he said.

She closed her eyes and obeyed. Her world narrowed to this room, the sound of his voice, and the feel of his hardening cock in her mouth. He continued to offer orders, not once laughing at her innocence.

Don't come too soon. I don't want this moment to end. I don't want to lose the sound of your voice. I want to stay right here...

...

Pleasure surged through his dick as Chrissie Tate heeded his words. She'd been so damn tentative when she first wrapped her lips around him, he'd been certain they

were barreling toward one helluva disappointing BJ. Not that he gave a damn. He wasn't naked in a hotel room and traveling down a familiar road labeled "fling" with America's country sweetheart because she gave good head.

"Harder," he barked as his control slipped. "With your hand."

Was he still making sense? The fact that she'd listened and shifted her performance from disappointing to one for the record books had stolen his focus.

Her mouth felt so damn good.

But it went beyond that. She listened. And yeah, they were talking about his dick...but still, she was hanging on his every word, following his instructions like this fucking mattered to her.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

It's like she gives a damn about what I want. Unlike my ex...

No, he couldn't go there. Not here. Not now.

"Chrissie." He growled. He was beyond calling out commands. He needed... He wanted...

"Hold on tight," she said, and her lips danced across the tip of his dick. She kept her gaze focused on his crotch. "I'm going to give you one heck of a ride."

She executed all of the moves he'd called out earlier. Her hand ran up his aching length with the perfect amount of pressure. Hell, he couldn't have done it better himself. And her mouth drew him in, taking him deep, until he couldn't hold back. Oh yeah, he was going to explode.

He leaned his head back and let out a scream that summed up this fucking perfect moment.

"Hooyah!"

Chapter Twelve

"I don't have much time before sound check." Chrissie pushed past him and walked into the hotel room. They were in a part of Colorado he'd never heard of before this tour, in a room that looked a helluva lot like the last stop.

Dante followed her into the room and stopped in the center. He folded his arms across

his chest. “And you wanted to squeeze in a lesson?”

“We could skip the SEAL training and head straight to the naked tutorial.” Her fingers toyed with the edge of her workout shirt and skirt that looked like they belonged on the tennis court. She’d skipped the elaborate disguise—apart from her Morticia Adams wig. But hell, even that was growing on him.

And yeah, he was on board with abandoning the pretense. He’d been replaying the Salt Lake City BJ in his head over and over. Looking at her, thinking about the way she’d hung on his every word, he was ready for a little naked action.

“I’m game.” He pulled his shirt over his head. “Turn around and place your hands on the bed.”

She raised an eyebrow. “What about my clothes?”

“I’ll take them—”

Ring! Ring!

The innocent-looking hotel phone cut through his words and shattered the mental picture of Chrissie bent at the waist and waiting to hear his voice. He was so damn turned on that he almost said screw the phone.

“I need to get that,” he said, his tone all business even though his imagination was still taking a trip down Sexual Fantasy Lane.

He shook his head as he walked over to the nightstand and the hotel landline. He’d come too damn close to putting his desire before his job. And when it came to her safety, he couldn’t take that risk. What if her crew had found another crazed fan

scoping out tonight's concert venue? Or a knife-wielding lunatic in their hotel lobby? Shit, that might be someone from Team Chrissie Tate trying to locate the star. This call could be related to the career she put front and center in her life—the same way he made the call to serve his number one focus.

...

Next time I plan to seduce a SEAL, I must remember to unplug the phone first.

Chrissie watched the man who'd previously planned to remove her clothes and give her an orgasm that would probably keep her smiling all the way through sound check and into her pre-concert dinner with her parents. She lowered her forehead to the crisp hotel bedding. That meal promised to strip away the lingering happiness from her SEAL training sessions.

"Raske," Dante said into the phone, drawing her attention back to their interrupted "lesson" in his hotel room. He listened for a moment and then, covering the mouthpiece, he mouthed the words, "It's your manager."

Mason, you're so fired.

If her manager was looking for her, there was zero chance she'd find out if missionary would seem boring compared to bent over Dante's bed.

"Yeah, I can find her and bring her down," he said into the phone.

Hearing those words, she knew that reality had found a way into her orgasm-filled fantasy world.

"Stay with her parents," Dante barked, and then he hung up the phone and turned to her, his expression grim.

“My parents?” she said.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

“Your mother and father are having a shouting match in the hotel lobby,” he said. “We’re not in Vegas anymore. And I’m guessing from your manager’s panicked tone, this isn’t the norm for the middle of the day in a Colorado hotel.”

“No.” She gasped, turning to the door. “I need to get down there.”

“We do.” He stepped in front of her and led the way into the hall. “If your parents’ fight turns physical, I have a feeling your manager will run for cover.”

“Physical.” He’d headed for the elevator bank, but she couldn’t get past that word. Her parents, the same mom and dad who had once shared long kisses in the kitchen when they thought their kids weren’t looking, were close to hand-to-hand combat in the lobby?

“Chrissie,” Dante called. “Now would be a good time to haul ass.”

She jogged down the hall to the elevators. Once inside, Dante hit the L button.

“You don’t need to come with me,” she said, crossing her arms in front of her chest. Thank goodness she hadn’t worn a costume. “I can handle my parents.”

“I’m paid to keep you away from volatile situations. I’m tempted to tell Mason to defuse this mess while I take you back to your room. There was never a question about you going down by yourself.”

“Mason can’t manage this,” she said as the elevator dinged and opened to the lobby. Compared to Vegas, the Colorado hotel’s reception area was like a ghost town at two

in the afternoon. But there were a few people, and plenty of staff. Most of them were watching the show unfolding by the sofas.

“What was the point of flying out here if you refuse to attend the concerts?” her mother demanded. She was wearing her tour uniform—designer jeans and a Chrissie Tate T-shirt. Mason was probably wishing her mom didn’t have her daughter’s name written across her chest while she screamed at her father.

“Lori, you asked me to come,” her father said. He sounded tired and looked worn down compared to the last time she’d seen him. “So I’m here. I want to see the girls. I’ll take Melissa tomorrow and give you a break.”

“Who’s with your sister now?” Dante demanded. He moved at her side and surveyed the scene. And she had no doubt that the man who delivered her to orgasm heaven in plain, old, boring missionary would jump in front of her and protect her from two of the people she loved most in the world—her parents—if the need arose.

“With one of the backup singers,” she said, stepping closer. Her parents still hadn’t spotted her. And they appeared oblivious to her manager. “Miranda has a little girl about the same age. She joined us in Portland.”

“I don’t need a sitter for Melissa!” her mother screamed. And Chrissie tensed. She could count on one hand the number of times she’d heard her mother yell before Joe’s death, before Chrissie had played her now hit song at a local fair and walked away with a record deal, before her success had become a matter of staying at the top instead of reaching for the peak.

“You should be at the concert,” her mother continued in the same enraged tone. “Standing backstage watching Chrissie sing and smiling for cameras before and after the show. How do you think it looks to the media? I’m here, supporting Chrissie, but you’re never there. Never.”

“I’m sorry, Lori.” Her dad glanced around the room and saw her. He tried to force a smile, but his face just crumbled further. “Hey Chris—”

“You’re sorry?” her mother seethed. “Your daughter is out there night after night, earning the money that supports our family. And you can’t even show up to stand on the sidelines? Or smile for a picture? She’s still alive, and she needs you in her life. And Joe’s gone. He’s dead and—and—you have to let go. You have to. We can’t go on like this. I can’t do this anymore.”

“I can’t.” Her father closed his eyes and lowered his chin to his chest. And Chrissie swore she saw a tear escape.

“Mom—” Chrissie called, stepping forward. But Dante’s hand closed around her upper arm.

“You can’t hide behind grief forever,” her mother said, raising the hand holding her clutch. Pain, sadness, and frustration vied for control. But in the end, her mother’s anger won.

Chrissie gasped as her mom sent the purse hurling through the air at her dad. “No!” she screamed.

“Stay back.” Dante growled, drawing her behind him as the bag hit her dad’s shoulder and fell to the floor. She struggled to get around the SEAL’s muscular frame. Her parents needed her. Someone had to control her mother. And her dad...

“They won’t hurt me,” she said. “I have to help them.”

“No,” her bodyguard said.

Across the lobby, her mother gasped, and her eyes widened. “Oh God. I’m sorry.”

She scrambled forward and picked up her purse. There were tears in her eyes now. And she looked just as broken. “It’s the stress from the tour, baby. There’s so much riding on this...”

Mason approached looking as if he’d summoned his courage and decided enough was enough. If anyone had their camera phone out, a video of her parents’ fight would hit the internet soon. Her manager knew that as well as she did. And she doubted her manager wanted his country starlet linked to a domestic dispute in a hotel lobby.

Chrissie scanned the space, but she didn’t see anyone recording. They were all pretending to look somewhere else now. No one looked back at the scene, and she understood why. Mason was leading her mother away. But her father just stood there, tears running down his face.

“I wish I could, Lori,” her dad said. “But I can’t let go of our boy. I visit his grave. And it’s not enough. It’s never enough. I think about him out there, in...in Afghanistan, so far from home... I just want my boy to come home.”

A domestic dispute between a country star’s parents might draw interest.

But there was nothing tawdry about a man weeping for his son who’d been killed in action. Of course the press might not see it that way. And what had happened here, what she’d witnessed—it was a private, family matter.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

“Daddy,” she said, breaking free from Dante’s protective hold on her. Her mother was by the elevators now and no longer a threat, not that she ever was, really. And she hoped her SEAL realized that. Her mom was broken, too.

“Daddy.” She reached her father and wrapped her arms around him. The man who’d ruled over her house, raised five kids on next to nothing, sobbed against her shoulder. He stood a head taller than her. But now, he seemed small and lost.

Chrissie closed her eyes and blinked back her own tears. Love, marriage—it wasn’t supposed to look like this. A grown man weeping in his daughter’s arms for the son he’d lost while his marriage crumbled under the weight of his daughter’s career.

“I’m sorry, kiddo,” her dad murmured. “I’d be there if I could.”

“I know, Daddy,” she said softly.

“But hearing you sing that song for your brother—I can’t take it.” He drew back and looked down at her. “I know it’s past time to stop grieving Joe like this. I know it.” He shook his head, and a strip of short gray hair fell over his forehead. “I can’t let go.”

“Don’t,” she said. “Don’t ever let go.”

“I’m so proud of you. Keeping Joe’s memory alive like that night after night. I just can’t stand there and listen.”

“I know, Dad.” She stared up at her father’s tear-stained face. He’d been their rock

for so long. Now, somehow, she'd find a way to take over for him. With the music he couldn't bear to hear, with the money coming in from her growing career, she would glue her family back together.

Chapter Thirteen

Dante remained within arm's reach as Chrissie embraced her father. His jaw tightened. This woman carried more on her shoulders than half the men serving alongside him overseas. She supported her family. She tackled her parents' marriage woes—as if she had a hope of fixing the wedge driven by grief. And she kept her brother's memory alive.

Who the hell was looking out for her? Her mother and her manager were focused on Chrissie Tate the country singer. But the woman at the epicenter? She was fending for herself.

And me. I'm here for her.

But he wasn't permanent, and they both knew it. He wanted to stand by Chrissie while her father tried to pack away his grief and talk to her. And he wanted to be there afterward, too.

She's not going to let me in.

Chrissie had been clear. Her career came first. Even if he could trust her while she moved from one city to the next... To hell with the "if." He'd talked more to her, shared more than he had during his entire marriage. And yeah, that sure put his marriage in perspective. He'd never opened up to his ex about what he wanted, in bed or out. And if she'd shared her desires, her hopes and her dreams—beyond her plea to leave the job he loved—well, she'd saved it for the plumber.

Did he trust Chrissie? After a few short weeks together? It felt impossible, but still...

Did it matter if he did? She'd never asked for a future beyond their lessons and this tour. And even if she did ask for more, he wasn't ready to put his heart on the line again. This time, he knew better. He had a job to do, and wondering about the woman waiting for him back home wouldn't help.

"I look forward to hearing your next number one hit," Mr. Tate said, drawing Dante back to the here and now.

"The love song?" She let out a laugh. "I don't think you're going to like that one very much, either, Daddy."

The pain faded from her father's expression, and he released her. "I heard about the video."

She glanced over at him. "You might want to skip it."

Please don't choose this moment to introduce me to your father.

But Mr. Tate's gaze had followed his daughter's and left Dante without a choice.

"Sir," he said, stepping forward and holding out his hand. "I'm your daughter's bodyguard."

"The Navy SEAL," her father said, taking his hand and shaking it. "Thank you for watching out for her. Her mother told me about the incident in Vegas. We've been worried about her."

"He's taking good care of me," she said. "You don't need to worry, Dad."

But someone did. She spent all her time focused on helping her family and safeguarding her career. Someone needed to look out for her.

“We should head back upstairs,” Dante said, stepping closer. He looked at Mr. Tate. “Do you need to visit reception before we go up?”

Her father nodded. “I should ask for another key. You go ahead, Chrissie. You should get some rest before your sound check. Though I think dinner’s probably off at this point. Your mom and I both need some time...”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

“We can still sit down and talk,” she protested. “I’ll wait while you get a new key. We can work this out.”

Her father shook his head. “Go on up, Chrissie. This isn’t your problem to solve.”

“It was a pleasure meeting you, sir.” Dante nodded to her father before placing his hand on her elbow and guiding her away. When they reached the elevator bank, he turned to her. “Are you all right?”

She stared at the call buttons for a second and then glanced up at him. “They used to be so in love. My mom and dad. They struggled month after month to pay the bills, but they worked together. Always laughing. And now they fight all the time.”

“I’m sorry,” he said. The elevator arrived, the doors slid open in front of them, and he led her inside. He wished he could offer her more. But he couldn’t piece her parents’ marriage back together any more than she could.

They rode in silence. And when they arrived on their floor, he stepped out first and scanned the halls.

“I’ll need to check your room,” he said.

She nodded and withdrew a key card from a small zippered pocket in her pants. He waved the key in front of the sensor and opened the door.

“I think they’re staying together for me,” she said as the door closed behind them.

He stole a quick look at her. She'd wrapped her arms around her middle. She looked nothing like the woman who'd walked into his room and demanded that they skip the lesson.

Dante's jaw tightened as he peered into the empty bathroom. He wanted to pull her into his arms. But first he needed to finish sweeping the room. After the bathroom, he opened her closet. Satisfied it was free from stalkers, he turned to her.

"At first I thought that losing Joe was driving them apart," she continued. "But they clung to each other after we lost him. Even when I first started singing, they worked together. That song has always been hard on my dad... But now, it's like the success is driving a wedge between them. And I'm not sure I can fix that."

He went to the edge of the bed and sat down. "Come here, Chrissie."

She followed his request and claimed the space beside him on the bed. He wrapped one arm around her shoulders and drew her close to his side.

"Feeling helpless stinks. Trust me, I know," he said.

"You're a SEAL," she protested. "You're not—"

"A sidelined SEAL," he corrected. "I'm not one hundred percent. If I was..."

"You wouldn't be here," she supplied. "You'd be out saving the world."

He nodded and tightened his hold. "But I'm not out there. I'm here with you." He ran his palm over her shoulder, up and down. "And I'm going to take care of you."

For as long as he was here, he would be her bodyguard, her lover, and her friend.

She placed her hand on his thigh. “When you say here, does that mean you plan to stay until sound check?”

“Is that an invitation?” he asked.

“Only if you promise not to bore me with plain old missionary again.”

...

“You were bored?” Dante released her and rose from the bed.

Chrissie tracked his movements, desperate for his touch. She wanted him to fill her, to help her bury her concern for her parents and their family’s future by filling her with desire. If he made her come, maybe she could stop wondering if her parents’ love had always been a mirage or if it had simply broken.

“You need something more interesting?” he added.

No, I need you, and you know it.

But she nodded.

“Stand up and turn around,” he ordered.

She did as he asked.

“Now bend over and place your palms flat on the bed,” he said.

“Right back where we started before the interruption.”

“Chrissie—”

“You’re good at giving orders,” she murmured as she followed his instructions. “Is that part of your job as a SEAL?”

“Sometimes,” he said as he wrapped his hands around her hips. “And other times, I listen. We’re a team. It’s a give and take.”

He ran his hand over her skirt. And for the second time that afternoon, he drew it up to her waist. She stared straight ahead at the empty hotel room wall and bit her lips. She didn’t want to wait for him to do all the work. She wanted to play a part in her pleasure and his.

“Pretend I’m one of your teammates,” she said, her voice low and firm.

“I don’t think so,” he said with a rough laugh.

“I want you to leave me just like this while you go into my bag—it’s on the chair over there—and pull out a condom,” she said. “And then I want you to move to the other side of the bed and strip. I want to watch while you cover yourself.”

“Someone likes to give orders,” he said.

In her peripheral vision, she saw him move to the chair. “I want to make sure you don’t bore me.”

He found the packet and moved to the other side of the bed. With his back to the wall, he began pulling off his clothes. His shirt, then his pants and underwear, until finally he stood naked. If she crawled onto the bed, she could reach him, touch him—

“Don’t move,” he said, his

hand moving around his cock as he covered himself. “I like having you right there. Your skirt flipped up and your shirt still on. Ready and waiting for me to take you.”

He walked around the edge of the bed. She felt him behind her, close, but not touching. Not yet.

“Dante—”

“Shhh. This time, I want the fantasy.”

“I’m not wearing a costume,” she protested. She’d abandoned her wig in his room.

“I’ll use my imagination.” His hand moved between her legs, testing her wetness. He slid one finger in and then another.

“Which one?” She gasped. “Which disguise would you picture?”

“The librarian.” His hands abandoned her, and she whimpered. He gave her bare backside a playful tap. “Be quiet now, Chrissie.”

“Or you’ll spank me?” she murmured.

“No.”

She felt his cock nudge at her entrance.

“I’m afraid spanking doesn’t turn me on,” he said. “Sorry if that disappoints you.” He thrust his hard length in another inch.

“You’ll have to make it up to me.” She ended her sentence with a gasp as he drove the rest of the way into her.

“Honey, if you’re not quiet...” he said, drawing back as he wrapped his hands around her hips. “Well hell, we’re going to have to do this all night. After sound check...after your show...”

“Over and over?” She tried to push back against him and fight for control of the pace. But he held her tight.

“Yes.” He growled, quickening the pace. “And I’ll make you come every time. With my hands, with my mouth, and just...” He slammed his hips against her. “Like...” He offered another punishing, but oh so pleasurable thrust. “This.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

She let out a low moan. He'd pushed her beyond words. Something sharp, something witty would be waiting for her later...after...not now...

Oh God!

One hand released her hip. But he didn't stop slamming into her as he slid his hand around and found her clit.

She screamed and fell apart, losing herself in the pleasure.

Minutes later, she collapsed on the bed, her stomach pressed against the sheets. And he moved with her, still covering her, still inside. But she'd heard him cry out. Through her loud moans, she'd felt a sharp pang of excitement, knowing he was following her into orgasm-land.

"We're going to have to try that again," he murmured.

"I make a horrible librarian," she agreed. "But I have this cheerleading skirt, if you're interested."

He groaned. His mouth nipped at her shoulder as if he needed to remind himself that she was there, and not the librarian of his imagination.

"I bet you'd make a damn good cheerleader." He shifted his weight off her and collapsed on the bed by her side.

"And I'll earn another orgasm?" She pushed off the bed and stood, looking down at

him with her skirt bunched around her waist. “If I change?”

He propped himself up on his elbows and offered a tempting view of his supersized abs. “Honey, after your show tonight, I’m going to make you come over and over until you beg for mercy and sleep.”

And until she forgot all about her parents’ fight and the problems she needed to face. He didn’t say the words, but she knew he was on a mission for more than pleasure. This was his way of taking care of her.

And she planned to do the same for him—in a very short skirt.

Chapter Fourteen

Dante could survive on an hour’s sleep. During some ops, he performed on a lot less. But watching Chrissie during sound check the next afternoon in yet another new venue, he had a feeling she probably should have spent the hours after they’d returned to her room sleeping instead of trying out her cheerleading costume.

But he wouldn’t trade the memory of her straddling him in the short skirt for anything. He grinned. It had been one helluva ride. He wasn’t complaining. Still, someone had to take care of her. And he knew exactly what she needed right now.

“Naptime,” he said as she exited the stage and handed the microphone off to Hank.

“I’ll have to settle for coffee,” she said. “I don’t have time to go back to the hotel. This city is a little more spread out than Vegas.”

“Lie down in the greenroom.” He took her arm and steered her to the cramped space that held a small sofa.

“I can’t. Not here,” she protested. “This space is for everyone.”

“I’ll stand guard.” He released her and moved to the door. “Now lie down and close your eyes. If anyone comes looking for you, I’ll handle them.”

After he gave the room the all clear, he left Chrissie on the sofa with strict instructions to sleep. Then he closed the door and positioned himself in front of it.

“Dante,” Mason called as he rounded the corner wearing another pair of his fashionably destroyed jeans. “Where’s Chrissie? I need to talk to her about—”

“Not now.” He crossed his arms in front of his chest and flexed his biceps. “She’s resting.”

“But the label needs—”

Dante summoned the glare he generally reserved for the bad guys. “She needs to rest.”

Mason’s eyebrows shot up. And yeah, her young manager wasn’t born yesterday. He’d witnessed that kiss during the music video, and he’d seen them together since then. But Dante didn’t want Mason speculating about Chrissie’s sex life. Not with him or anyone else.

Because there better not be another man in her bed.

He pushed the sharp pang of jealousy away. She wasn’t his. Not beyond today, maybe tomorrow and, if his knee didn’t get up to speed, the day after that. He needed to keep a tight rein on his possessive feelings.

Hell, this was why he avoided flings. He wanted to go all-in for the woman in his

life—and in his bed. He led with his heart, not his mind. And right now, he could use a little logic, which would tell him that a woman whose career pulled her in ten different directions and a man who had a difficult time trusting that history wouldn't repeat while he spent the foreseeable future abroad—they didn't have a future together. They had right now.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

“I doubt Chrissie will mind losing a little sleep to talk about her new album,” Mason said. “The label needs to see more tracks.”

“Maybe you should have thought about that before you called her down to the lobby to deal with her parents,” Dante shot back.

“Look,” Mason said, dropping his voice. “I don’t want them here. I know their problems are a distraction. But I can’t send the talent’s family packing.”

“The talent,” Dante repeated through clenched teeth. She was a person, with wants and needs—including sleep, dammit.

“Chrissie,” Mason corrected, taking a step back. “Chrissie would never let me send her family home. Plus, it’s good for her image. The girl-next-door country singer with the loving parents.”

“That music video didn’t strike me as wholesome,” Dante grumbled.

“No, it’s not,” Mason agreed. “And country music fans will eat it up. The sweet girl who sings a racy love song? I think we have a hit with that one, which is why I need to talk to her about completing the record. She has to write a couple more songs.”

“I’ll tell her you stopped by,” Dante said. “After her nap.”

...

Chrissie hovered on the edge of sleep. She’d walked off the stage feeling as if she

could close her eyes and drift off to dreamland while standing up. Even after Dante left her room, the moon still high in the Colorado sky, she'd been unable to sleep. The weight of what she needed to do, of all she had to accomplish, kept her awake until the sun began to rise.

Now, the bits and pieces of Dante's conversation with her manager drifted through the door, barring sleep. Mason was right. She needed to write another couple of songs. And she wanted to use her own words. But what did she have to say?

She sat up and searched the room for a pen and paper. She found a marker by the coffeemaker and a few

napkins. Not ideal, but good enough. Now she just needed the words...

She closed her eyes and waited for them to flow. But her world felt as if it was spinning beyond her control. The family she'd always known was crumbling around her. She couldn't keep up with the demands of her career. And the one person she wanted—Dante—would be leaving soon. One week, another month, and he wouldn't be there to catch her when her world felt as if it might fall apart. She needed to push forward on her own, without her guard SEAL to watch over her.

"Chrissie?"

She looked up and saw Dante peering into the room. He frowned as he walked in and closed the door behind him.

"I saw the light on," he said. "You're supposed to be napping."

"I had an idea for a song," she lied.

He walked over and glanced at the blank napkin. Then he gently took the marker

from her hand. “You can work on it later. Mason, your label, they can all wait.”

“But—”

“Shhh,” he murmured as he sank down behind her on the sofa.

He placed his hands on her shoulders and he began to knead the tense, tired muscles. His thumbs ran down her spine, his fingers gliding over her shoulder blades, and she closed her eyes. He reached her lower back, and she felt a jolt of heat and need.

“We can’t,” she said. “Not here.”

“Honey, we’re not getting naked in the greenroom,” he said as his hands retraced their path to her shoulders. “I’m not trying to seduce you,” he added.

“Oh.”

“I’m going to help you relax and fall sleep.”

She lowered her chin to her chest. “It’s working,” she whispered.

When she woke, she would focus on her unwritten songs. She could think about how this man seemed determined to take care of her at every turn. And it felt so good. Too good. When he left...

She felt the tension fighting for purchase in her shoulders as he continued to rub her back. When he left, she’d be able to focus on her music. That was the bright side. And the fact that she’d miss him and his orgasms? His late-night lessons and his back rubs?

She’d find the words for her pain and put them into a song.

Page 41

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

“Lie down,” he murmured, his hands guiding her toward the sofa. She went willingly and felt the cushions shift as he rose. He’d released her back, and his hands now steered her legs up onto the loveseat.

“Sleep,” he ordered.

And she obeyed.

...

“They’re calling last night’s performance ‘tired’,” her mom said from the other side of the tour bus, her gaze fixed on her laptop.

“Mom, you shouldn’t read the reviews.” Chrissie glanced across the bus to where her father was playing cards with Melissa. He’d skipped last night’s show. She knew he would. But she’d still glanced offstage and hoped to see him. Not for her big number one hit, but for the others.

“What happened last night?” her mother demanded.

“The band was perfect,” she said with a sigh. “You were there. You heard the show. It was good. I was just...”

Tired.

The reporter was correct. Even after Dante’s massage and her brief nap in the greenroom, she’d walked onto the stage feeling drained. Between her “lessons” with

her bodyguard, which stole time away from the growing to-do list, and the demands of writing a new album, she'd pushed sleep and rest to the bottom of her priorities.

Now, she needed to make a change. She couldn't afford lackluster performances. It wasn't fair to the fans who had paid for tickets, or the family depending on her to bring home the proverbial bacon.

Her stomach grumbled. She'd skipped breakfast this morning, trying to make up for the lost time spent in Dante's distracting arms.

"As soon as we arrive in Denver, you need to rest," her mom said.

"I will," she said. But when it came to choosing between an hour spent alone and asleep in another hotel bed, or an orgasm in Dante's arms that would probably change the way she thought about Colorado's capital...

Sleep. You can't afford the distraction.

"How are the new songs?" Her mother closed the laptop and looked expectantly at her. There was so much hope in her momma's tone.

And what could she say? I've been too busy in bed with my bodyguard to write? Her relationship with the SEAL left her emotions swirling. If she put those feelings into her music...

She would have a hit record. But she might miss out on her last chance to seduce her SEAL before he left. Once he returned to the teams, they needed to end their fling and stop the distractions threatening her career.

"Uno!" her little sister shouted.

“Melissa, please keep your voice down on the bus,” her mother said. “I’m trying to talk to your sister. This is important.”

“The new songs are great,” Chrissie lied. And she added a forced smile just in case her mom could see right through those empty words.

“Good,” her mother said. “I spoke with Mason earlier and told him to set up a call with your label.”

“Mom, we don’t have time,” she protested. “There’s a show tonight.”

“They need to know you’re still on track,” her mother said. “A brief update after your show tonight will erase their concerns.”

But they have every right to worry. I haven’t written the songs.

“I should probably head to the back of the bus and keep writing before we get to Denver,” she said. “If I have to show them something tonight.”

She stood and glanced at the powerful, imposing SEAL who was riding shotgun in her tour bus. After tonight’s show, she wanted to lose herself in his arms, not chat about music she hadn’t produced yet. She craved Dante’s comforting touch. She wanted him—beneath her, on top of her, kissing, touching, and making her scream his name. One more night before she said good-bye and focused on writing about her emotions instead of following them to their natural end—a relationship she couldn’t afford to keep.

She slipped into the room at the back of the bus and closed the door. Plucking a pad of paper and a pen from the shelf, she sat down and stared at the blank white sheet. She waited for the words and searched for the melody. Eyes closed, she tried to focus.

But her mind summoned the image of Dante's too-perfect muscles and the memory of his voice offering instructions. A single emotion rushed through her—desire. Right now, she wanted him more than just about anything.

She opened her eyes and focused on the paper again. Maybe if she wrote something, if she gave tonight's audience a high-energy show they'd talk about for weeks, maybe then she could give in to desire one more time.

Chapter Fifteen

“How’s the knee?”

A few days ago, Dante would have answered that question with a pointed “fuck you.” But he wasn’t about to curse at the Navy’s top doctor. Plus, he had a better response.

“Getting there,” he said, his cell pressed against his ear. “The pain is fading. I was able to run six eight-minute miles on the treadmill today. The range of motion seems solid. And I...I trust it. I feel my leg is ready to listen and perform.”

Dante inhaled and waited. He hoped like hell the doctor believed him. Dante knew this guy worked with SEALs all the time. He’d probably heard men with bullet holes tell him they were A-OK for active duty.

“You’re ready to return to your team?” the doctor said. “You don’t think that you’ll slow them down?”

“No, sir.”

Damn, this doc was good. He knew that a team player wouldn’t risk his fellow SEALs lives for a chance at the action. Yeah, Dante wanted to get back to the job he loved. But part of his job was looking out for the guys serving alongside him. Some of them had been at his side since Hell Week. They supported one another. The team, the mission—it all came before ego. Or shit, they’d probably all die out there.

“I won’t let my team down,” Dante added.

“Good,” the doctor said. “Let’s set up a physical. If that goes well, I’ll consider clearing you for active duty.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. A chance to go back to work, to use his training for something more than standing on the sidelines at a concert and looking scary...oh hell yeah—

Knock. Knock.

“Sir,” he said, rising from the bed. “I’m going to have to call you back.”

“Call my office tomorrow and set up the appointment,” the doctor said.

“Will do, sir.”

He ended the call and slipped his phone into his pocket. He was expecting a costumed visitor eager for another late-night “lesson,” but he’d dropped her off at her room less than fifteen minutes ago. He’d assumed she’d need more time to change into her disguise before heading down the hall to his door.

Peering through the peephole, he saw a head of blond hair. He pulled open the door and stepped aside for her to enter.

“Hi.” Chrissie walked into his room in fitted jeans and a white T-shirt. She looked like the Chrissie who showed up for sound checks or played cards with Melissa on the bus. She’d removed her public, country-princess persona, including the layers of makeup she wore onstage. And she’d changed out of her all-American clothes.

“Hey.” His brow furrowed as he continued to study her outfit. “I give up,” he said

finally. “Who are you tonight?”

“Just me. No disguises tonight.”

She reached for the hem of her T-shirt, drew it up, and revealed her toned abdomen. There was a curve to her belly that suggested she worked out, dancing and singing every night, but she didn’t obsess over sit-ups. And yeah, he was noticing the exact line and shape of the skin he’d kissed and licked as if really seeing her for the first time.

No costumes. No disguises. Just Chrissie.

“And if someone saw you?” he challenged, his gaze following her hands as she drew the shirt up over her white lace bra.

“I checked the hall.” She tossed the shirt aside. “And it’s mostly backup singers and dancers on this floor any

way. They’re not going to stop me and demand an autograph.”

He nodded as her shirt hit the floor.

“I know you were expecting a hot librarian, or a French maid, but...” She released her bra and shrugged it off her shoulders. “But I didn’t want to pretend anymore.”

He nodded, and his gaze followed the movement of her full breasts. Yeah, he’d studied those before, but they still left him speechless.

“After getting up there tonight and pouring my heart out,” she continued, “after showing that crowd who I am and what I feel when I think about Joe, or love, or life, after being honest with them through my music, I couldn’t walk in here and pretend

with you.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

He stepped forward, fully aware that he'd gone from zero to ready for action since she walked into his room. His hard-on pressed uncomfortably against his jeans, begging him to follow her lead and lose the clothes. "Chrissie—"

"Tonight, I want you to want me, not the kinky setup." She released the button on her jeans.

Two steps and he closed the space between them. He grabbed her hands and held tight to her wrists.

"While we're being honest," he began as her gaze lifted to meet his. "I didn't toss aside my plan to steer clear of meaningless rebound flings because I can't resist a French maid costume. I didn't say yes to bedding my boss, the woman signing my paychecks, because you showed up at my door looking like a male fantasy. I couldn't resist you."

"You don't care what I wear?" she asked.

"The disguises were just icing on the cake, honey. I don't give a damn about them. Not as long as I get to help you out of your creative clothes." He drew her pants down her legs and guided her out of them. Then he stood up and faced her.

"And you don't need the pretense of a SEAL training session?"

He laughed. "If a little PT, if the idea of physical training turned me on? I'd never hear the end of it from my teammates. And I probably wouldn't have made it through Hell Week."

She buried her fingers in the plain black shirt he'd worn for her show. He hadn't bothered changing out of his blend-into-the-background bodyguard clothes.

"But." He reached one hand behind him and drew his shirt over his head. "Maybe it's time for you to give me a lesson."

"You'd like to learn to sing?" She ran her hands down his bare chest to his abs. The muscles contracted beneath her touch. "Play the guitar?"

"No, I'm not a SEAL who secretly wishes he was a country star," he murmured. He placed his hands on hers and guided them lower. "I want to know what turns you on. Tell me how you like to be touched."

He wanted to turn the tables on their little BJ lesson from the other night. He'd never opened up to a lover before, and the end result had blown him away—literally. Now he wanted to do the same for her.

"I think you know by now," she said. "Better than anyone."

Oh hell yeah. He wouldn't hide from the fact that he liked knowing he'd taken her places, to new heights of pleasure. Logic dictated that it was impossible, but still, he wanted her to be his for tonight, tomorrow, and the day after that.

"I want to learn more," he insisted. He had to memorize every detail about her while he still had the chance. Active duty loomed in the future, calling to him, and he was ready to go. But hell, he was going to miss her.

"And you'll do the same," she said, her fingers toying with the closure of his jeans. "You'll share, too? And tell me what you like?"

"I like it all, honey. As long as it's with you. But—" He placed his hands on her hips

and spun her around. He ran one hand up over her lace-trimmed panties to her back and gently pressed. “I want you to tell me if you want me here. Like this. Bent over the bed—”

“Yes,” she hissed, and her hands reached for the mattress’s edge.

The movement thrust her ass up in the air, and Dante couldn’t resist. He drew her panties down her legs, lowering himself to the floor in the process. “Step out of them,” he ordered.

She obeyed, lifting one slim leg and then the other until her underwear lay abandoned on the floor.

“Now, spread your legs,” he said. And when she didn’t move, he added, “Please.”

She heel-toed her feet farther apart, providing space for him to slide his broad shoulders between her legs. With his ass planted on the carpet, he let his abs do the work and hold him up as his fingers ran up her inner thighs. He brushed the curls at her center before venturing farther.

“Tell me what you want,” he said, his lips inches from her core.

“Lick me,” she whispered.

He ran his hands up to her ass and pressed his tongue to her clit. He licked and sucked and adjusted the pressure as she moaned a series of “harder,” “no not there, higher,” followed by “lower,” and then his favorite “oh, Dante!”

She left out God and every other higher power. This was just a man loving his girl like crazy.

Loving.

The word echoed in his mind. And yeah, he was pretty damn sure he felt it in his heart as he slid one hand around and slipped a finger inside her. He'd been telling himself the truth when he'd said no more flings. He wasn't here for a quick fuck or fantasy sex. And he'd been honest with her. He didn't give a damn about the costumes.

Because he'd gone and fallen in love with the woman beneath the short skirts and ugly wigs. He'd fallen hard for America's country sweetheart. For the woman who put her family first. For the brave performer who took the stage and dared to share her heart with the world.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

He was a fool to love her. He worked for her. He'd made a promise to keep her safe. Shit, he was leaving soon. He wanted to go. He wanted to fight and do the job he'd been trained to do. And he knew she wouldn't be waiting when he returned. She'd be off to another city, charming another audience, and doing what she loved.

Even if he asked to join her, find her when he had downtime, he'd have to trust that she would still be his when he returned. And he'd have to force himself to lock the worry and what-ifs away while he served...

Impossible.

His tongue glided over her clit, and he focused on the feel of her bucking hips, the taste of her—

“Dante!” she screamed. “Dante, please.”

He kept his finger buried inside, but he pulled his mouth away from her clit. “You’re asking so nicely—”

“Dante, make me come!”

“Yes, ma’am,” he murmured. He repositioned his tongue on her and claimed her in earnest as he thrust his fingers in and out. This was only the first orgasm he planned to give the woman he loved tonight. But he wanted to set the bar high. If he could make her scream his name like that, so loud the whole damn floor had probably heard her, then just wait until he buried his cock inside her.

...

Ring! Ring!

The familiar, high-pitched sound was like an exclamation point at the end of her orgasm. Chrissie leaned forward and pressed her forearms into the mattress. She could feel Dante moving between her legs. He'd stopped the supposed "lesson," the one she'd been leading with her loud, wild cries, and was pushing himself off the floor.

She lifted her head and saw him pick up the phone. Studying the lines of his bare chest, she was pretty sure she needed him more than the person on the other end of that call.

"Mason, what can I do for you?" Dante said into the phone. His brows drew together as he listened to her manager. Then he nodded. "I'll bring her down. Right away."

She stood and looked around for her T-shirt. "What did Mason want? Are my parents fighting again?"

"He wasn't calling about your family this time," he said, his gaze fixed on her. "According to your manager, your label was expecting another song by the end of the day. They'd set up a call to hear what you'd put together. Mason's been looking for you and, well, he's not stupid."

"The call," she murmured as she sa

nk onto the bed. How could she have forgotten the deadline for the song or the scheduled conversation with her label?

Because you killed it out there on the stage. And you left wanting one thing...

Dante. She'd pushed aside everything but her desire to make love to this man.

He ran his hand over his face. "Do you want to go and call them? I told Mason I would bring you down to your trailer in the lot. He's there waiting for you. He said the people in Nashville understood your crazy schedule. They're waiting up for you."

"I haven't finished it yet," she said, closing her eyes. She'd been too busy in bed with her bodyguard.

"Do you want me to stall?" Dante sat down beside her on the bed.

"No, I need to go and talk to them." She had an idea for a song. It had been percolating for a while, but she'd pushed it away, knowing it might break her heart to set the words to music.

"You don't have to, Chrissie," he said firmly. "You've had a long day—"

She looked up at him. "This is my job. My career. I know it's a far cry from saving lives, but this is what I do. It matters to me, to my family, and to my fans."

He took her hands in his. "I get it, honey. I do. But if you're not ready—"

"I have an idea." She pulled free from his hold. "I'll tell them about it tonight. Promise a special reveal. I can't let them find out I've been distracted."

"You've been working your ass off," he said, following her to the door.

She glanced over her shoulder and offered him a smile. The pained look in his dark eyes suggested he could see past the forced grin. "No, I haven't, Dante. I've been taking time for myself. And while it's been fun, I need to get back to work."

“Fun,” he repeated, his jaw tightening as if she’d threatened to come at him with one of his Navy SEAL tricks, maybe an open-handed slap across the face...

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

But the time for SEAL lessons, for games and costumes, was over.

She placed her hand on the knob. “Good thing I skipped the maid outfit tonight, huh? I wouldn’t want to rush out and meet Mason in that.”

“Yeah.” His hand covered hers, holding the door shut. “Before you go back to work, before you leave, I want to thank you for showing me the real Chrissie. Even if it was just for one night.”

I knew the man who gave me a back massage in the greenroom so I could relax wouldn’t slam the door on me if I forgot my maid costume.

Still, she hadn’t expected him to tell her how much he wanted her, not the fantasy. He’d said those words as if he thought they could find a way forward. As if he’d seen through her getups from the beginning.

Impossible.

Tonight was a wake-up call. She needed to stay focused on her career.

Chapter Sixteen

Dante wanted to go out there and tell her manager, her label, and even her mother, to go to hell. But he couldn’t ignore the fact that telling them off would throw a roadblock in Chrissie’s path to success. Her future was focused on her career.

And he was nothing more than a distraction.

He got it. She'd told him the truth, which was a helluva lot more than he could say for his ex. And yeah, he understood what she'd meant, probably better than anyone else. Because, if he went back to work, his heart and mind wondering about the woman he freaking loved, he'd be distracted, too. And he couldn't afford to let his personal life interfere with his job.

He scanned the parking lot as they exited the hotel and headed for her trailer. The door swung open and Mason appeared, a cell phone pressed to his ear. Her manager waved to them, and Chrissie picked up the pace. He followed, matching her stride for stride, still surveying the dark lot.

"Would have been better to meet inside," he said.

"Next time," she muttered as they reached the steps. "My notes are in here."

Yeah, like he'd still be around for her next major call. "That's what I'd recommend," he said. "For your safety."

She spared him a parting glance over her shoulder. "Would you mind waiting out here while I take the call?"

He nodded, thrusting aside the feeling of having a door slammed in his face. "After I check the trailer."

"But Mason's been in there," she said. "And I need—"

"I need to do the job you hired me to do," he said. He stopped himself before he added a sarcastic "Ms. Tate." None of this was her fault.

Fuck, it was his. He'd gone and fallen in love with a woman who talked to him, who communicated her needs, fulfilled his fantasies, and who put her career first—always.

So much for listening to freaking logic and keeping a hold on his heart. He'd gone from a wild rebound fling with a Vegas dancer to loving a woman who drew the line at wanting him for sex.

And self-defense training. He couldn't forget their damn lessons.

He quickly scanned the trailer, and he ignored Mason's panic as he checked behind doors. The manager wanted Chrissie on the phone now, but her safety came first.

When he'd completed his search, he stepped out of the trailer and closed the door. He assumed a parade rest position and forced himself to tune out his feelings, his wants, his desires—everything but the parking lot and his mission. He was here to keep Chrissie Tate safe.

Nothing more.

Their future wasn't a problem he could solve. Hell, it was like ripping up his knee all over again. He could get in and reach the girl, but he couldn't find a safe exit strategy. But at least this time, instead of a knee injury, he'd leave with a broken heart. He didn't need that particular organ fully functional to be cleared for active duty.

Still, heartache sucked. And knowing he'd spend the next few days traveling with her, always at her side, keeping her safe but not touching her? Talk about hell.

...

Chrissie glanced over at her bodyguard. He'd maintained a professional presence, always nearby, checking rooms before she entered, and leading the way when they approached a crowd. But he hadn't crossed the line since Denver.

Of course, her panic had been for nothing. Her label loved the idea for her new song

and the way she planned to present her future hit.

But her late arrival to the call had thrust Mason into hyper-focused mode. Her manager worked around the clock now to ensure her success, talking to the publicity team, and assuring her label that more new songs would be ready soon. He'd even stepped in to help with her family woes—by purchasing a one-way ticket back to Florida for her father.

Page 46

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

“Sweetheart, I’d stay longer if I could,” her dad said. “But your mother wants me home when the twins get back. And I think we both know I’m not much help here.”

“I’m glad you came, Daddy.”

He gave her a woeful smile. “I never did see you sing. I’m sorry about that.”

She shrugged. “There’s always next time. I’m sure Mom will make you come back.”

“She might,” he said, his smile fading. “I hope she does.”

She wrapped her arms around her father. What could she say? Mom still loves you? She wasn’t sure if that were true anymore. She didn’t know how to judge love. Dante had opened her eyes to a world of want and desire. But the kind of bone-deep need “to have and to hold till death do us part”? She didn’t have a clue about that.

“Have a safe flight, Dad,” she murmured, pulling him in for another hug.

“Be careful out there. Listen to your mother, your manager, and your bodyguard over there.” Her dad nodded toward Dante. “I don’t want to hear about any more run-ins with stalkers.”

“I will, Daddy.”

They said their final good-byes and I-love-yous before her father turned and disappeared through the Albuquerque airport security.

Dante was at her side a moment later. “I need to get you back before the bus leaves for California. Mason gave me strict orders.”

She glanced up at him. “I know my manager’s upset that I decided to take my dad to the airport myself. Though it’s his fault that he booked a flight out of an airport an hour from Santa Fe. But I still sign your paychecks, you know that, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.” He turned and headed for the automatic doors. “But we also have to return the car to the hotel. And I was told you still need to finish your next number one album.”

“Don’t jinx it,” she muttered, following him to the short-term parking area. She’d been working on lyrics since she’d pitched her ideas in Denver. She’d always known he would be returning to the SEALs once his knee healed. But when she’d started writing, her feelings poured out.

She glanced at Dante as she climbed into the passenger seat of the car borrowed from the hotel. She didn’t want him to leave. But the idea of him staying was worse. What he did out there, with the other SEALs and sailors, it was important. If it wasn’t...then her brother had given his life for a career that could be set aside on a whim.

He turned onto the service road leading away from the airport. She waited for him to say something.

Tell me you miss our lessons. Tell me that you miss talking to me, or guarding me while I nap.

Nothing...

I miss you. Your touch. Your kisses.

But what was the point in telling him? He would be leaving soon. And while she wanted to tear a hole through the distance that had erupted since she'd been forced to face the truth—she couldn't handle the distraction of a relationship without dropping the ball on something else—she knew she would miss him more when he was on the other side of the world and walking into harm's way.

But he hasn't left yet...

She should keep her distance. Breaking it down now would only make the end harder. And she had to walk away. She couldn't get tangled up in love and miss another call, or show up tired to another show. Not that this was love. She wanted him. Knowing he was leaving soon only spurred her lust forward.

He's still here...

"Can you take the back roads?" she asked, pointing to a sign marked Turquoise Trail. "I've never been to this part of New Mexico."

"I don't think we have time for sightseeing today." He headed for the highway entrance ramp. "We'd better stick to I-25, or I'll get an earful from Mason."

"Afraid of my manager now?" she said.

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"No," he said, merging onto the road. "But I like the way he looks out for you."

"I don't think Mason would stand his ground and hit hard if needed," she murmured. "But he might haul ass."

"Not all battles are physical. He does his part to keep you safe and further your

career. I thought that was important to you, too.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

She stared at him, studying his profile as he returned his attention to the road. His jaw was taut. He was waiting for her answer. She knew what she should say: yes.

But right now, she didn't want to be Chrissie Tate, the country star. She wished she could keep that world locked away in the trailer that had her name written across the side in big pink letters. For an hour, maybe two, she wanted to lose herself in her SEAL's arms again.

"It is important," she said softly. "But..."

"Honey, I know your music means a lot to you." His grip tightened on the wheel. "But I want you like crazy and, I'll be honest, the fact that I'm leaving and you're moving on doesn't change that."

She turned and looked out the window. Wide-open desert stretched for what looked like miles, leading to mountains. Part of her wanted to toss aside reason and embrace the SEAL sitting beside her. Tomorrow night, in San Diego, she could take the stage and tell the world she'd fallen for her bodyguard. She could offer him love and ask him to open his heart to her in return.

But did she love him? She wasn't sure. She didn't know. She could trust in the facts. He was leaving. Her career dictated how and where she spent her time. Even if she handed over her heart to him, there was no guarantee love would be enough.

For Chrissie Tate the country star. But for the girl who poured her heart and soul into her lyrics during her breaks from her job at the grocery store? That girl wanted to use what little time they had left and take advantage of the fact that they were alone. She

wanted to live on the edge, allowing herself to feel without worrying about the consequences.

The landscape was stunning, but she wasn't looking at the distant mountains anymore. "There's a parking area up ahead," she said pointing to the sign.

"It says 'no facilities'," he said.

"I know. But I want you to stop anyway," she said. "And don't you dare say Mason wouldn't like it. This isn't about him or my job or your commitment to the Navy. I need to...I need to finish what we started the other night. I owe you that much."

"You don't owe me a damn thing," he said. But he did as she asked and veered off the highway.

She waited until he put the car in park. The rest area was deserted apart from a semi in the corner. Someone could pull up and peer through the window. She could be recognized. Or, if she went through with her plan, arrested. Still, she couldn't let him leave thinking, believing that she didn't want him enough to risk it.

She reached over and ran her hand along the firm ridge beneath his jeans. With her other hand, she released her seatbelt. She adjusted her position in the passenger seat, drawing her legs up until she was kneeling with her torso over the center console.

"Chrissie, what the hell?"

She undid the button and then drew his zipper down before reaching inside his briefs. With her hand wrapped around his cock, she lowered her mouth. "I owe you this. I refuse to let you leave until I hear you come screaming my name."

Chapter Seventeen

Dante leaned back his head and laughed. And yeah, this was probably the first time he'd ever found a blow job funny. But she looked so damn possessive kneeling in the front seat with her hand around him. The edge in her voice dared him to push her away and keep up the pretense that they were done trading orgasms.

Logic told him to guide her away, to strap her into the passenger seat, put the car in drive, and head for the relative safety of the tour bus. But his damn heart had been sabotaging his common sense since he met her. He knew they didn't have a future. And he'd already admitted to himself that he felt more than he should for her. Still, he wasn't going to stop her.

Shit, if Hell Week had included telling the woman he loved not to suck on him, he would have flunked right out.

"All right, Chrissie." He released his white-knuckle grip on the wheel and ran one hand through her hair. "Make me scream."

She took him into her mouth and ran her lips and tongue down to meet her hand. And he leaned his head back and closed his eyes. If she was determined to do this, he wasn't going to fight her off. Only a fool would tell the woman he'd fallen in love with to keep her hands and mouth on her side of the car.

He moaned as her tongue swirled around the head of his cock. No, he wasn't a fool. He knew he needed to make the most of this moment and memorize the feel of her lips on him and the way her head pumped his eager dick as if she'd memorized his instructions from the other night.

"A custom blow job," he murmured.

She drew back, keeping her hand wrapped around him. But dammit, he wanted her mouth back.

“A what?” she asked, humor in her tone.

“You’re giving me exactly what I want, honey.” He opened his eyes and stared down at her. “The other night, I told you what I liked, and you listened. And now, I’m getting a custom job.”

“Of course I listened.” She lowered her mouth, taking him deep.

He watched, knowing damn well there was no “of course” when it came to relationships. He’d been married to a woman who never shared her wants, her desires, her hopes and her dreams. And yeah, he’d been just as guilty. But there were some things he could not tell anyone. His job was a web of secrets, and that wouldn’t change.

He studied her movements and allowed the pleasure to wash over him. But hell, he didn’t want the best blow job in the freaking world. He wanted Chrissie.

He didn’t love her because she gave great head. He’d fallen for her drive and her passion for her music. He was crazy about the way she gave her all to her audience every night. And yeah, he flat-out loved the fact that she shared his belief that there were some things worth fighting for—and maybe dying for.

Page 48

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

Maybe that belief will make it okay to keep secrets...

Or maybe it would cut away her trust. There was only one way to know for certain—head down that road and see if it all fell apart.

His fingers pressed tightly against her head as if he wanted to hold her there forever. His gaze remained focused on the sheet of hair trailing down her back and over her shoulders. His hips thrust upward into her eager mouth. And he couldn't look away. He was so damn close...

“Chrissie.” He growled.

And she moved faster, took him deeper. She gave and gave and gave—

He came. His hips bucked in earnest, and he didn't try to pull away. He couldn't... He didn't want to...

And at the last moment, he remembered to scream.

“Chrissie,” he roared. “Oh, fuck...”

I love you...

No, he couldn't tell her. Not now. Not like this. So he bellowed the one word he could say over and over.

“Chrissie!”

...

“I want to go back to Vegas.”

Dante stood with his arms folded across his chest and flat-out lied to the chart-topping country sweetheart. And yeah, Chrissie looked the part right now in her red, white, and blue sequined top.

She'd just stepped off the stage after performing to a sold-out auditorium in sunny Southern California. He'd missed the show due to his lengthy physical with the Navy's best and brightest doctors. But he didn't need to see her sing to know that she'd brought the crowd to their feet, made them cry, and left them damn glad they'd showed up tonight. Although one glance at her new bodyguard, a woman who'd served with the Marines before accepting a position with one of the country's largest personal protection companies, and he had a feeling the new hired muscle wasn't a country music fan.

Just wait, Ms. Marine. It's not all about tractors.

?

?Walk with me,” Chrissie demanded, and he fell into step beside her.

They weaved through the unfamiliar backstage halls that looked oddly similar to the ones in other venues. They reached a door, and she stepped back and allowed him to open it and scan the empty dressing room.

“All clear,” he said.

She glanced at her new bodyguard. “Please wait out here, Moira.”

The woman gave a curt nod before assuming a parade rest position outside the door.

“Your new bodyguard seems solid,” he said as she closed the door.

“Yes.” She turned the lock. “She’s great. Although Mason said he picked her because she’d blend in. And I’ve never met a more rigid person. I’m not sure she’d blend in anywhere.”

“He picked her because I told him to. She’s one of the best. Or so I’m told.”

“Is that why you picked her? Not because she’s female and there is less risk I’ll end up in her room late at night?”

If you do, I’ll be jealous as fuck. I don’t want anyone else touching you—male or female.

“She’s the best,” he repeated.

“You’d like me to email pictures of our training sessions?” she teased.

“No. Oh hell, no.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

His mind jumped to the photos he'd found on his ex-wife's phone after he learned about her affair. He'd never forget the close-ups of the plumber's junk. And he knew that if Chrissie sent him intimate shots of the woman on the other side of the door, or pictures of the two of them, he wouldn't be turned on. He'd be heartbroken.

"Good," she said and forced a small smile. But it quickly faded. "So they gave you the all clear and you still want to come to Vegas? I'm not sure that's a good idea."

"I have five days before I report back," he explained. "I'd like to spend them with you. Plus, your last show in Vegas proved you need extra protection."

"You're worried I'll be attacked again?" she asked, her eyes widening.

Shit, he didn't want to scare her. "No, I'm not worried. And I think you'll be safe with Moira. I reviewed all of the résumés, and she's the best."

"Then why aren't you staying here?" she asked. "You could work on your knee. Rest up. See your friends."

"My knee is fine. The doctor said I could jump out of a plane tomorrow, land, and run ten miles. And I'd be fine."

"Jump out of a plane," she repeated. "If I had to do that, I wouldn't be worried about my knees. I think I'd probably have a panic attack before I reached the ground."

"Nah." He closed the space between them and cupped her cheeks in his hands. "I've seen you up on the stage night after night. It takes a lot more guts to do what you do."

His thumbs stroked her cheeks. They'd been careful to steer clear of each other since their detour to the New Mexico rest stop. But he had to touch her. "I want to spend the next few days with you. I'll have time for training when I get back. Let me go with you to Vegas. Not as your bodyguard, but as your friend. We can get dinner at one of the fancy celebrity-chef restaurants."

"A dinner date?" She wrapped her hands around his wrists, but she didn't push him away. She held tight to him as if she hated the idea of letting go as much as he did.

"Yeah. Call me a romantic, but I don't want this to end with a BJ on the side of a highway."

She smiled and ran her hands up his arms. "I thought that would have been a high note for you."

He leaned down and brushed his lips over hers. Then he drew back and looked down at her. "I won't forget it, trust me. But I want more. A chance to talk while we share a meal. Then a trip to the bedroom where we both come. I want it all."

Her smile faded. "Impossible."

"Is it?" He released her cheeks and ran his hands over her bare shoulders, down past her sequined tube top. He stopped when he reached her hips and held tight. "I know I'm going back to my team and you're hitting up God knows where next—"

"Nashville and then a bunch of east coast cities," she supplied.

"All I'm asking for is one date."

And the chance to let you know that I love you when you don't have your mouth wrapped around my cock.

“Dante—”

“One more night in Sin City,” he said. “What do you say?”

“Yes.” She rose up and pressed her lips to his. “But I have two conditions.”

“Done.”

“But you haven’t heard what I’m asking for yet,” she protested. “You can’t just say yes.”

“All right.” He lowered his lips to her ear. “Tell me your demands, honey.”

“First, while that door is locked...”

He pulled her closer and let her feel how much she turned him on. “Go on,” he murmured.

“I want a massage,” she said.

He laughed. “All right. And your second demand?”

“His and hers Sin City orgasms when we get to Vegas.”

Chapter Eighteen

After two years of costumes and disguises—onstage and off—Chrissie pulled on the little black dress she'd bought for her brother's birthday party. He'd been home on leave, and some of his friends from high school had hosted a party at a neighborhood bar. She'd been over twenty-one and making enough scanning groceries to splurge on a new outfit. It was the last time she could recall dressing entirely for herself.

The fitted material hugged her curves. And while the hem hit above her knee, it wasn't nearly as short as the disguises she'd worn to Dante's room. She slipped on the matching black heels. They looked cheap compared to the shoes her stylist selected, but she still loved the simple pumps.

She heard a knock, and her smile faded. When she reached the entrance to the suite, she opened the door and waved him into the sitting area. Unlike the rooms in Salt Lake City or Santa Fe, the luxury Vegas hotel—a different venue from her last four-night engagement—offered spacious rooms complete with sitting areas, separate bedrooms, and floor-to-ceiling windows with a view of the famous Strip.

He stepped inside, and her grip tightened around the door handle. She'd seen him stripped down to his plain white briefs—and he'd reminded her of Superman. But in a dark blue suit and tie? Her Navy SEAL looked like Clark Kent minus the glasses. If only they could make their way straight to the part of the evening when he tore off his shirt superhero-style.

"I'm sorry, Dante. I can't go out."

“You look beautiful,” he said, drawing the door away from her death grip and gently closing it.

“I look like me.” She waved to the dress. “I bought this for a party years ago. It’s mine. Not a costume or a disguise. I mean those are mine, too. But they’re not me.”

He nodded as if she’d made complete sense. Maybe she had. She was telling him the truth.

“But,” she continued. “If I go out like this, someone will recognize me.”

He cocked his head and studied her. “Would you like to change? I don’t give a damn if you wear a wig. But you might get us tossed from the steak house if you show up in the French maid outfit. Plus, I’d have to kill every man who laid eyes on you. It would be midnight before we reached the restaurant.”

“No, I’m not spending my last night with you in an ugly wig. That’s not how I want you to remember me.”

“I’m sticking around for your concert tomorrow night,” he said. “I’m not heading back to Coronado until Sunday morning. If the wig makes you feel comfortable in the restaurant...”

“I don’t want to hide or pretend with you. Not anymore. We’re done with that.” She turned away from the door and headed for the sitting area.

He followed. He wouldn’t give up without trying everything he could think of to get her to dinner. “And I don’t want to share our relationship with the world. I’m sorry. But I want you all to myself. And out of that suit.”

She gave a half smile as she sank onto an armchair. “You walked into my life looking

like a limited-edition treat. And now, I don't want to let you go. Just when I think I've found someone who sees me, who wants me for more than a fantasy-filled fling—"

"Shh." He dropped to one knee in front of her chair and placed his index finger over her mouth. "You have, Chrissie. I don't give a damn about your fame. I admire your drive. And your passion for your music makes me want to listen to songs about tractors and dead dogs. But trust me, honey, I want you more than I want the fantasy."

"This feels so real," she murmured as his hand moved to her cheek.

"It is, honey. But we don't have to share that fact with a room filled with strangers. We can stay right here, maybe tackle your second condition. Afterward, we can order room service."

He leaned forward and kissed her. His tongue tangled with hers, explored her mouth, and drew her in until she was ready to hand over the dress she'd worn for him.

He pulled back. "Let's switch positions."

"Your knee?" she asked as he stood.

"Fine." He held out his hand. "But when I pictured the his and hers orgasms you requested, I didn't see an armchair. Show me to your bedroom, honey."

She took his hand and let him draw her up. Then she let go. She kicked off her shoes, skipped past him, and headed for the doorway. He could see her destination, the king-size bed, through the opening.

He followed at her heels. She could feel his presence behind her, large and promising.

She slowed her steps a few feet from the bed, half hoping he would catch her and draw her to him. She wanted him to take her, claim her, and make her his. No matter where he went after this, she would belong to him.

But he didn't reach for her.

"Do you know what I want?" she said, turning to face him, her back to the bed.

"Tell me." He shrugged out of his coat and tossed it aside.

"Straight-up, plain old missionary."

He took a

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

step forward and loosened his tie as he moved. “I might bore you.”

“I’m willing to risk it. Or you might try harder to make sure that you don’t.”

He laughed. “I’ll do my best.”

She closed the space between them and placed her hands on either side of his button-down shirt. “First, we need to release your inner superhero.” She pulled and...nothing. Not one button popped off.

He laughed harder. And wow, that sound was a deep, intoxicating sound, like a shot of whiskey straight to her core.

“Honey, I’ll get naked for you,” he said. “You don’t have to tear off my clothes. Just ask.”

“Please,” she murmured. “And quickly.”

“Yes, ma’am.” He stripped with an efficiency that left her thanking the Navy for his years of training.

And then he reached for her and drew her to him. His hands felt as if they were everywhere at once, touching, teasing, and pulling off her clothes. Her dress landed on the floor beside his pants. Before she could issue another request, he was on his knees and guiding her out of her panties. When he stood, he had a condom in his hand.

“Is that a magic trick you learned in the Navy?” she asked as he moved closer and forced her to step back. Her legs bumped into the bed, and she climbed up onto the smooth sheets.

“I learned to always be prepared.” He joined her, knelt between her legs, and covered himself.

“I swear one of these days I’m going to take this nice and slow.” He trailed his hand over her lower abdomen, and he moved lower and lower until his fingers slid between her legs. He raised them to his lips and licked. “But tonight is not one of those nights.”

But this is our last night...

“Maybe the next round. After dinner,” he continued as he positioned himself at her entrance. “But right now...” He thrust into her. “I need to—”

“Take me,” she said, arching her back and allowing her body to open to him.

He thrust in and out, his pace frantic, pushing them closer and closer to the finish line. His lips ran over her throat and down her neck. His hands were everywhere, molding her breasts, teasing her taut nipples, then sliding lower and lower...

He slid one hand between them and touched her clit. “You’re mine,” he murmured.

The deep sound... Those words... His touch...

Her body trembled, her thighs quivering as the orgasm took hold. She arched into the pleasure.

So good...so deep...so fleeting...

“You’re mine, Chrissie.” He growled, pumping faster and harder. His movements were unrestrained, wild, as if something in him had snapped.

“Your turn,” she whispered. “Take me, Dante. You think that I’m yours? Prove it.”

He pushed back and stared down at her. His hands pressed into the bedding at her sides as he thrust one more time. And then he exploded. But not once did he look away or close his eyes. He kept his gaze locked with her as if he was silently trying to tell her something.

“Dante?” she murmured, running her hands up his arms.

“Fuck. I didn’t want to do it this way,” he murmured, his hands still pressed into the mattress at her sides, holding his weight off her.

“You’re bored?” she murmured, her fingers gliding over his biceps and heading for his chest.

“I have to say something, dammit.” He growled. “Sex doesn’t get better than this. What just happened, what we did—that was perfection, and it had nothing to do with our position or some crazy kink. I love you, Chrissie. I fucking love you.”

Love. Oh God. Oh no.

And then he kissed her, bypassing soft and heading straight for the I-need-you-forever soul kiss. She’d never been kissed like that. As if the words weren’t enough, as if his mouth wanted to show her how he felt—and silently ask if she loved him back.

I do. I love you.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

She wrapped her arms around him and held tight to the feeling. She loved her Navy SEAL. And she wanted to kiss him forever. She never wanted to stop. She didn't want to let the outside world in.

Because when she did, when the kiss ended and they left this room, she'd remember that love didn't come first in his life. And if it did? Then he wouldn't be the man she wanted, whom she had fallen for in the first place.

Chapter Nineteen

“How do you plan to keep her safe in New York?” Dante tossed the three-page, meaningless document on the folding table in Mason's office. “And in Boston? Nashville? This ‘security plan’ reads like it was written to placate the suits—”

“It was,” Mason admitted. “I wrote it.”

“But how are you going to keep her safe?” Dante demanded, placing his palms flat on the table and glaring at her manager.

“I was hoping you would help with that,” Mason said, not even flinching at the way Dante hovered over him. When they had first met, the manager would have whimpered with fear if Dante encroached on his space. But now the man in the designer jeans looked as if he'd expected this.

“I'm leaving,” Dante said flatly as he sank into a folding chair across the table from Mason. He couldn't go with her. Staying at her side, loving her and hoping like hell she'd love him back—that wasn't going to happen. “You should ask Moira, or the

fancy company she works for.”

“I did,” her manager said. “And they’re putting together a plan. Yours would be better.”

Dante nodded. He’d grown accustomed to the respect that went hand-in-hand with being a SEAL. But this moved beyond his training.

He’d professed his love for Chrissie Tate last night while buried inside her. He’d wanted to stay right there, clinging to the remains of the “his and hers orgasms” he’d promised her. And wait for her to tell him she loved him back.

Instead, she’d gently slid out from underneath him and climbed off the bed. Then she’d turned to him and said three little words that sank his hope like a damn anchor.

Thank you, Dante.

He hadn’t wanted her gratitude then any more than he wanted it now. He wanted her heart, her love, and her promise that this was it—forever. He’d wanted to stay up late figuring out how the hell they’d make this work when they barely stood a chance at being in the same city at the same time.

I should have left last night.

Yeah, he should have run back to Coronado and his team. He should have walked out of her room and jumped into his truck. But loyalty and love packed one helluva punch. And he couldn’t go yet. He loved Chrissie Tate, and he’d said he would stay for her Vegas show. One more night in the crazy city that had brought them together.

And while he waited for her to take the stage, he would do everything in his power to keep her safe while he served his country. Then, he’d hit the gym like he did last

night. He'd climbed out of her bed, said a hurried good-bye, and gone to the hotel weight room. He'd pushed himself, trying to make his knee hurt.

He'd known then that he should leave. But instead, he'd reported for duty this morning even though he wasn't on the payroll anymore.

"While I'm here," Dante said, making a note about potential exit strategies at the Washington, D.C. venue. "I want to see her fan mail. Any suspicious pieces?"

"I set aside two for Moira's review." Mason pushed back from the table and headed to a stack of papers.

"Why didn't you show me when I got back last night?" Dante demanded.

"Chrissie said you had plans." Mason tossed two envelopes on the table.

"Interrupt. This is more important. I know you work for her, but you need to take her security seriously."

"She told them she wouldn't finish the new songs for the album if I bothered her last night," Mason said, sinking back into the folding chair across the table. "She said I wasn't to disturb her, or you, under any circumstances. And Dante, these letters aren't that suspicious. Probably just overexcited fans."

"I'll judge that," Dante said. Yeah, he loved hearing about

how she'd set aside last night for them. But that didn't change the fact that Mason needed to focus on her safety.

And last night had led to a dead end.

He scanned the letters. One fan wrote about joining her on the road and waking up with her every morning. He claimed to love her. Dante tossed it across the table to Mason. “Might want to flag that one for the cops, too.”

The second one was a long, crazy poem. The dude who’d written it sounded unhinged, but unlikely to pose a specific threat. He didn’t express a desire to meet her, touch her, or even be in the same room as her.

“I wouldn’t worry about this one,” Dante said, sliding the second letter across the table. “But I’d hold on to it. Anything else?”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

Mason nodded and pushed an envelope across the table. “Chrissie asked me to give you a front row ticket to this evening’s concert.”

“I can watch from the wings,” Dante said, shaking his head.

“She wants you in the audience tonight.” Mason leaned back and folded his arms in front of his Chrissie Tate T-shirt. “She told me to make you take the ticket if I had to.”

Dante raised an eyebrow. “How do you plan to do that?”

“I’m banning you from backstage,” Mason said, his voice firm as if he knew Dante wouldn’t beat him up. “If you want to see the show, you’re watching from the front row.”

Dante stood and swiped the ticket off the table. “Fine.”

...

Hours later, after a punishing workout, Dante stood shoulder to shoulder with Chrissie Tate’s adoring fans, stared up at the stage. He always watched her concerts from the backstage area. But if she wanted him here, he’d follow her orders. Hell, he wasn’t here to play bodyguard tonight.

Damn right I’m not.

He was here for her.

He glanced around at the eager crowd. Men and woman staring up at the stage as their favorite country star finished “Rush of Love.” She belted out the lyrics that went hand in hand with the music video they’d shot.

Yeah, I’m here for her like every other fool in this place.

But no one else in this concert hall—in this whole freaking hotel—had professed their love to Chrissie Tate last night while buried inside her.

His jaw tightened as he turned his attention back to the stage. Chrissie stood in the center of a pool of light. A microphone was positioned on a stand in front of her, and she had her acoustic guitar over her shoulder.

“Tonight I want to perform a new song for you all,” she said.

The crowd roared with approval. Out of the corner of his eye, Dante saw the man to his right, who looked like a linebacker, dancing with glee in front of his seat.

“I finished writing the words this morning,” she continued. “But this is one that I’ve been thinking about for a while. My band hasn’t heard it yet, so I’m going to give them a break.”

Behind her, the drummer set aside his sticks and prepared to listen. The others stepped back, giving Chrissie the stage.

“And for the record,” she added with a playful smile, “I didn’t run this by my manager or my label. You’re the first ones to hear it.”

The linebacker was close to knocking over everyone in their row with his happy dancing. But Dante maintained his position, his attention on the star of the show. And he swore she was looking right at him.

Wishful thinking. Like hoping she'll promise to love me after a few weeks on the road together and a helluva lot of sex, some kinky, some not-so-boring.

Chrissie played a few chords on her guitar, and the Sin City theater fell silent. She leaned into the mic. "This one is called 'When Love Comes Last.'"

Fuck.

Dante took the hit. Those words felt like a swift uppercut, and he braced for the lyrics, knowing it would be like a series of jabs. But he'd stand tall and listen to her sing.

Because she's right. Sometimes love takes second place.

He'd known that from the start of his first marriage. He had loved his ex-wife, and he'd remained loyal to her. But sometimes, his country came first.

The first verse of the song washed over him. And the message was pretty damn clear. Love needed time and space to grow. Holding hands, long kisses under the moonlight—she'd incorporated the tried and true elements of a country love song. But then she reached the chorus.

He watched as she hesitated, repeating a chord or two as if she'd lost track of the song. Instead of staring out into the lights, she appeared to be scanning the front section. Or maybe that was wishful thinking on his part.

But then, she seemingly summoned her courage and sang.

With every kiss, I steal you away from someone who needs you more...

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

He closed his eyes and pictured the hostage, the scarred half-starved American woman who'd been capture by terrorists. He'd saved her life. Sure, he'd only been one piece of the team that had busted in to rescue her. But if he hadn't gone, if he'd stayed home and held tight to the woman he loved...

No, that wasn't an option. He couldn't let the bad guys win. As long as he was physically capable of fighting people dead set against destroying the things he believed in, the promise of freedom that had pushed his grandfather to resettle in this country, he had to go.

If you stay, you wouldn't be the man I know. The man I love...

He opened his eyes and, from his position in the front row, he saw the tears rolling down her cheeks. She'd cried onstage before while singing the song about her brother. But she'd never wept like this, the tears washing away her makeup and revealing her freckles.

She looked so damn vulnerable up there. But it was a disguise. A mirage. She was strong. Hell, she'd even learned to fight like a Navy SEAL. She could take care of herself and her family.

And if she quit, if she pulled back from the career that demanded she move from city to city, well hell, she wouldn't be the woman he'd fallen in love with, either. Her family needed her right here, on this stage and the one after that.

When loves comes last to another's hopes, when love comes last to a child's dreams...

Dante filled in the blanks as she played a guitar solo. When love came last, when it needed to take a backseat to something so much more important—like holding a family together—then that love didn't belong in the present.

He turned and pushed his way to the aisle. He muttered apologies as he went, but he knew he had to leave. Now. He couldn't wait until the end of the show. He couldn't walk up to the woman he loved and congratulate her on writing a song that would hit number one on the damn charts.

The lyrics bombarded him like a rapid-fire attack, and their message cut as if he'd been hit. Hell, he couldn't fault her for hiding her thoughts. Now, she'd mastered communication, all right. She'd even offered an easy out. No messy good-byes or what-ifs, just a front row ticket to her heartbreak.

And his.

He paused at the door that connected the auditorium to the Sin City hotel. Behind him, the audience rose to their feet and clapped. He glanced over his shoulder and took one last look at the woman on the stage. He couldn't see her tears from here, but he knew they were still there. She clutched her guitar as if it were her lifeline.

What if he rushed the stage, overtook her security, and smashed that damn instrument to pieces? He could go up there and fight—not for a hostage or peace in an unstable part of the world, but for a future that felt so far out of reach.

He turned away and pushed through the door. He felt tears threatening to fall. There was no point in chasing heartbreak. He'd already suffered his fair share and then some, leaving him feeling like half a fucking SEAL. Now, he needed to walk away and focus on safeguarding his heart again. And then he needed to turn his focus to his career.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured with one last glance at the now-closed doors. He could hear the audience on the other side applauding her performance. “I can’t stay, because you’re right, our love belongs in the past.”

Chapter Twenty

Chrissie stared at her manager and tried to determine if she should hit hard or haul ass.

I can’t break Mason’s nose for delivering good news.

Still, she was having a hard time holding tight to logic since Dante left. He hadn’t said good-bye. He’d just vanished. She’d panicked after the show when he didn’t reappear. And she’d tried calling his cell. But he hadn’t picked up. Not once.

By three in the morning, she’d dragged her new bodyguard on a wild search to find Cassie, the lead singer from her opening act. And she’d demanded that other singer call Ronan, her boyfriend, and find out if the SEALs had gone wheels up.

Cassie had done as she’d asked. The SEALs were in Coronado. For now. The next morning, Ronan’s girlfriend had told her that Dante was back at the base. He’d gone for a run with the guys that morning.

And Chrissie had tried to be happy about the news. She’d smiled for her fans at the airport as she boarded the private jet headed for Nashville. On the flight, she’d played card games with her little sister, followed by dolls—anything to avoid talking to her mother or her manager about the song she’d performed last night.

But now, back in the Nashville recording studio, she couldn’t hide from her manager anymore. She couldn’t haul ass and hide behind the pretense of needing to play another game of Go Fish with Melissa.

“Did you hear what I said, Chrissie?” Mason stood in the recording studio’s writing room. It held two couches and a baby grand piano. “The live acoustic version of “When Loves Comes Last” is number one on iTunes.”

Chrissie nodded and forced a smile. “I heard.”

“The label wants you to record your new hit with the full band,” he added.

She nodded, half listening as her manager rambled on about future plans for the song and her label’s requests.

“Congratulations,” Mason said. “There’s no chance you’ll be a one-hit wonder. Not anymore. And if “Rush of Love” takes off—”

“It won’t,” she said. Because she hadn’t written that one from the heart. When she’d penned those lyrics, she didn’t have a clue how it felt to fall in love. And she hadn’t experienced heartbreak.

B

ut now...

“‘Rush of Love’ won’t hit number one, and you know it, Mason.” She picked up the pen and paper on her lap. “But my next love ’em and leave ’em song will.”

Her manager leaned his shoulder against the door. “Chrissie, you’ve had a couple hits, and everyone’s thrilled with ‘When Love Comes Last.’ But you need something fun and upbeat. If you want to keep going in this business—”

“I do,” she said firmly.

“Then you need a hit song that isn’t tied up with loving and losing a soldier,” he said.

“Sailors. They’re sailors.” She turned her attention to a pad of paper in front of her. Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted her cell phone lying on the wooden table, nestled between the couches. Should she try Dante again? Just to make sure he was all right?

No, he’s out there doing what he’s supposed to be doing—saving the world.

And she needed to stay here and pour her heart into her music. She couldn’t let her mind wander and wonder if she’d made a mistake.

She heard Mason leave, the door clicking shut behind him. She needed to write. Her songs were the only pieces of her life that had always been there for her. But, as she put pen to paper, she couldn’t escape the nagging doubts.

What if I made a mistake? What if I messed up, placing my career and my success first? What if Dante's more important?

But even if she said yes to her heart, even if she walked out of this recording studio and boarded the next flight to California, he'd still ship out.

"Chrissie?"

A knock accompanied the familiar voice, and she looked up as the door opened. Her mother stepped inside.

"I'm writing, Mom," she said, waving the empty paper. "And I don't want to talk about last night. Mason's already stopped by to share the good news. The song is number one."

"That's great." Her mother claimed a seat on the opposite couch. "But I'm not here about the song."

Chrissie looked at her mother. "I don't want to talk about him."

"Chrissie, this has nothing to do with you. But I'm going to leave the tour for a while," her mother said. "I need to spend some time in Florida."

Nothing to do with her? Her success had shredded her parents' picture-perfect love.

"Dad can handle things at home," Chrissie said, rising to her father's defense once again. "You can trust him."

"I do." Her mother glanced down at her entwined fingers. "And I still love him. But if we have a chance of making our marriage work again—"

“You need to stay away from my tour. My career. This crazy, fast-paced industry that...that feels like poison when it comes to relationships.”

Her mother’s gaze snapped up to meet hers. The blue eyes mirrored her own. Her mom abandoned her place on the couch, crossed the small sitting area, and claimed a seat beside Chrissie.

“No,” her mother said. “Your father and I—our problems go back a long time. I heard your song last night, Chrissie. And you’re right, sometime love comes second to kids and work. For us, we didn’t have a choice. We needed to prioritize work to keep our family together. But underneath it all, driving us, was love. For you, your brothers and sisters. And for each other.”

“Mom, I’ve heard you fight,” she protested. “You never used to scream at each other.”

“Not in front of you,” she said. “And when things started falling apart, well, we learned after the twins were born that we needed to seek help. We started seeing a marriage counselor. We went back after Joe died. But then your career exploded, and we wanted to support you, honey. We did our best—”

“At the cost of your marriage,” she said.

“Along the way, we forgot to put love first. It’s still there. We just need some time together to talk things through.” Her mom patted her knee. “And I know you have your music under control. You’re doing great, Chrissie. But don’t forget to take some time for yourself, too. You can’t put your job first forever.”

“I need to write this album,” she said, still reeling from the revelation that she hadn’t destroyed her parents’ marriage with her climb to country stardom. She wasn’t to blame for their problems. It wasn’t a simple choice between her success and their

love...

Of course it wasn't. Love didn't arrive in a neatly tied package, waiting to be unwrapped at the perfect time. And it couldn't be stuffed back inside on a whim.

"That song's all wrong," she muttered.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

Her mother stood. “Chrissie, it was honest and heartfelt. That’s never wrong. But please don’t stay in that place forever. If you love him, your bodyguard, find a way to make your relationship a priority.”

“It’s too late,” she said. “He left. He didn’t even say good-bye.”

“I’ve been married to your father since I was eighteen. We’ve had our ups and downs, but we’ve always found our way forward together. Trust me, it’s never too late. I know you can find a way if he’s what you want.”

“He is. But Dante’s a SEAL.”

“Even SEALs can fall in love.” Her mother reached down, took her hand, and pulled her off the couch. “Don’t walk away from him because it feels impossible. Or at least, that’s my advice. You need to do what’s right for you.”

Chrissie held tight to her mother. A relationship with the SEAL she loved looked like a deadly obstacle course. He’d deploy to a terrorist hot spot. She’d fly from one American city to the next. When would they have time to be together and make sure their love didn’t crumble?

Never.

But the only other option, not touring and waiting for him in Coronado, being there when he came home...could she give up her career for Dante?

Maybe.

She glanced at the door. She wanted to run to him. But it felt selfish. Her family had so much more now. And she could keep providing for them—if she stayed.

She pulled away from her mother's embrace. "Say hi to Dad for me. And the twins."

"I will," her mother promised. She headed for the door, gave one last wave, and then she was gone.

Chrissie sank down on the sofa. Time to write a fun, upbeat love song. Her pencil hovered over the page, and her mind stumbled back to the first time she'd walked out of her hotel bedroom wearing a French maid outfit, or when she'd walked into his room in her short skirt and boots. The heat in Dante's eyes...

Take it off...

You're mine tonight...

The words flowed. And so did the tears. Because she didn't want the memories. She wanted Dante.

Don't walk away from him because it feels impossible.

Her mother's words echoed in the empty room as if they wished to override her upbeat lyrics. Maybe her career wouldn't prove a dead end. She'd been so certain her fame had destroyed her parents... What if she was wrong again? About her and Dante?

If she was willing to try a long-distance relationship, if she promised to do whatever it took—long flights from her latest concert to California, fewer tour dates, less recording time...

The odds were stacked against her. Chances were they'd never be able to make it work. But as long as he was alive, as long as he loved her, she had to try.

"Mason," she screamed. She was on her feet and at the door, pulling it open. She found Moira, her silent and always-present bodyguard outside the door. "Mason!"

Her manager rushed down the hall. "What's the matter?" he demanded.

"I need to go to California," she announced. "I have to find Dante and tell him I was wrong."

"Chrissie." Mason raised his hands, palms flat in surrender. "You have a concert at the Bluebird in a few hours. Your fans are expecting to see you on that stage. And you demanded that all the money from this one go to charity."

Go anyway, she thought.

But she couldn't do that to the fans who'd given her so much. Without them, she would still be writing songs durin

g her breaks from scanning groceries. She'd be playing bars and small-town fairs. And she'd have never met her guard SEAL.

Plus, she'd have to refund the ticket price, and the charity would lose out because of her love life. And if she was wrong about Dante... If he didn't want to try...

"After the show," she said firmly. "I want a plane at the airport, waiting to take me to California. I don't care where he is. If he's out in the ocean or running those crazy fast miles with his team. I'm going to find him."

...

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

“What the hell, man?” Ronan called as he ran up to Dante’s side and matched his pace. “This isn’t a peaceful sightseeing jog down the beach. You need to run like your life depends on it. Or my life.”

Fuck you, sir.

But he didn’t dare say those words out loud. Instead, Dante charged forward and kicked up sand as he went. This wasn’t an official training exercise. He still had forty-eight hours before he reported for duty. But Ronan had agreed to run with him and help kick his ass into gear for when he returned to base.

“Did all that standing around, guarding a cute piece of ass—”

“Fuck you.” Yeah, this time he didn’t hold back. No, he stopped and turned to face his friend and teammate, fists raised and ready to fight.

Ronan jogged in place and raised his hands in the universal signal of surrender. “Relax, Dante. I’m just giving you the kind of shit the guys are going to dole out when you get back. And you know you need to turn around and walk away when they do.”

“No fucking way,” he shot back. “Would you just stand by and take it if Cade or Jack called your girl ‘a piece of ass’?”

“No, but I’ve made it clear that she’s not a one-week or even one-month distraction,” Ronan said as he turned and started running again.

Dante followed, matching the punishing pace. “Chrissie wasn’t just a distraction. I love her.”

“And yet you’re spending your last few days of medical leave running with me.” Ronan shook his head but didn’t slow down. “I’m sure your girl is feeling the love right now.”

“You heard that damn song.” Dante growled. The words he knew she’d written for him had played over and over on the radio. And to rub salt in the wound, they repeated a recording of her live acoustic performance in Vegas. “She’s tied to her music career, sleeping in a different city every night. And you know we’re going wheels up soon. I was on the base today, and I heard rumblings about Syria. Who knows how long we’ll be there? It’s not like their civil war will end tomorrow, the terrorists will move out, and everything will go back to being hunky-dory.”

“Be nice if it did,” Ronan said. “But yeah, I’d say that’s a fantasy.”

“Relationships take time. Hell, look what happened to my last one. All that waiting and worrying takes a toll. Never mind the fact that I can’t say a damn word about where I’ve been when I return. And if I can’t even see Chrissie when I’m back in the states?”

“Who says you can’t?” Ronan asked. “I’ve managed to see Cassie. She flies to San Diego when I’m here. And we keep in touch. Email, letters. You know Jack and Cade do the same. Jack wrote to Natalie every day on our last deployment and the one before that. He’s probably penned a book by this point.”

“But...” Dante panted, pushing himself to run faster. Because dammit, Ronan wasn’t even breathing hard.

“But this is about your ex, isn’t it?”

“I loved her,” Dante ground out. “I gave her everything I had to give. And still our marriage broke. We stopped talking about damn near everything. And after that, her loyalty went down the drain.”

He’d spent a lot of time looking at how “till death do us part” had turned into “till I start screwing the plumber.” And yeah, that particular trip down memory lane had always left him bitter. He’d felt like a failure, incompetent when it came to love and happily ever after. But now? Looking at the past made him sad. Still, there was also a sense of relief that it was in the past. And maybe the sense of hope that he could make different choices this time. That Chrissie wasn’t his ex, and happily ever after could be his—theirs—if he had the balls to claim it.

“Stop,” Ronan barked.

Dante planted his boots in the sand, placed his hands on his knees, and glanced up at the friend and teammate who outranked him. “What the hell, man?” Dante said. “I was finally hitting my stride and you—”

“Do you trust Chrissie?” the redheaded SEAL demanded. With his hands on his hips, wearing camo pants and black steel-toed boots that matched Dante’s, Ronan looked every inch a Navy SEAL officer.

“Yes, sir.” The words slipped out. And Dante realized he didn’t have to give it a second thought. He had faith in Chrissie. No internal debate needed.

Ronan raised his eyebrows. “You believe she won’t cheat on you? How can you be sure?”

“You don’t get it,” he said. “She’s different from my ex. Chrissie understands my call to serve. Hell, listen to her lyrics, man. It’s part of what she likes about me.”

“A lot of women like SEALs,” Ronan challenged. “They’re drawn to the idea of the superman. They want to be the one to bed the hero.”

“Not Chrissie.” Dante stood tall and faced his friend. “I mean she likes the SEAL stuff. In the beginning, she wanted SEAL lessons.”

“Spare me the details,” Ronan said dryly.

“Self-defense lessons,” Dante said, and he was about to call his teammate out for his dirty mind. But looking back on where those lessons had ended up, and yeah, best to leave that one alone.

“Sure, Dante. But do me a favor and don’t mention your ‘SEAL lessons’ to the guys. I don’t want to hear about the young newbies hitting up the local bar and offering special SEAL sessions to the women.”

He wouldn’t breath a word to anyone. But still, he wanted Ronan to understand. “Chrissie respects what we do, man. And she gets why I want to serve my country not just for a few years, but as long as I can. She understands me in a way... Hell, I never thought a woman would accept my drive to be in the Navy. But she does.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

“I know,” Ronan said, and his tone shifted back into serious mode. “I’ve heard her music, too.”

“And talk about loyal.” Dante looked down at the sand. “She stands by her family and her fans. She gives and gives to them, never expecting anything in return.”

“Let me see if I understand,” Ronan said. “You found a beautiful woman whom you trust. By some miracle, she welcomed your crazy ass into her bed. And you’re standing here, with forty-eight hours left of medical leave, running on the beach in your boots, and she’s...”

“In Nashville,” he said. “She has a concert tonight, recording tomorrow, then she ships out for New York City.”

“Does she give bad head?” Ronan said.

Dante took a step back. The SEAL officer sounded like he was channeling one of their other teammates. Ronan wasn’t crude. “She...”

Gives custom blow jobs.

“Chrissie’s great in bed, asshole,” he said. “I’ve never met anyone who loves me like she does.”

Because she listened to him. He told her what he wanted, and she didn’t toss aside his words. As long as they talked to each other—in bed and out—they’d been able to communicate their needs.

“Then what are you doing here?” Ronan asked softly.

Dante took off, his boot-covered feet chewing up the sand. He hadn’t run this fast since his accident. But he had to get to Chrissie. He couldn’t wait another minute. He had to talk to her. And this time, he’d make it clear that he wanted to find a way forward. He trusted her. He loved her. They could work out the details from there—as long as they just kept talking.

Chapter Twenty-One

Dante scanned the security team outside the Nashville venue. Compared to the Vegas hotel auditoriums or big city arenas, the Bluebird Café held a couple of dozen people. And at first glance, he thought he had the wrong address. But then he saw Moira the Marine giving instructions to the bouncers.

“Moira,” he called as he rushed to the front door.

She turned to him, her expression like stone. “Raske. I was told you’d reported for duty.”

“I have forty-eight hours, ma’am.” He stopped in front of the former Marine and assumed a parade rest position. “I’m here to see Ms. Tate. She’s performing here tonight, right?”

Moira nodded. “She takes the stage in fifteen. You can see her after the show.”

“I’d like to speak with her now,” he said firmly.

Chrissie’s bodyguard shook her head. “After. She’s nervous right now. Representatives from her label are here. No visitors are allowed—including family and friends—until after the show.”

“Did Mason tell you that?” he demanded. “I bet her manager intended to keep her parents away. Not me.”

“The rules aren’t open to interpretation, sir.”

“I’m not an officer,” he said. How the hell was he going to get around Moira? “Is Mason around?”

Moira stared at him. “He’s dealing with a ticket crisis right now. You’ll have to wait.”

“I’ll buy a ticket,” he said.

“I have orders. Ms. Tate cannot be distracted tonight.” Moira marched over to the bouncer collecting tickets. “Don’t sell this man a ticket.”

Then she turned on her heels and disappeared inside.

Dante glanced through the open door and spotted a handful of empty tables. Most of the men had removed their cowboy hats and rested them on the table. But one glance around at the variety of boots and fitted jeans...he’d bet this crowd appreciated a song about a tractor. Still, they all looked clean and ready for a night out. And some wore suits with their boots, suggesting that this was a working night on the town.

He looked down at his clothes. He still wore the ripped, sweat-stained T-shirt he’d been running in before he’d headed to the airport. He hadn’t stopped at home to shower and change. With forty-eight hours left until he reported for duty, he’d wanted to get to Chrissie. He’d grabbed

his go-bag, a duffel with a change of clothes, and some gear, and he’d boarded the next flight to Nashville.

“How long before the show starts?” he asked the bouncer, an idea taking shape in his mind. He’d been trained to find a way around “no” and to think outside the box. And he didn’t give up easily.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

“Not long now,” the large man guarding the café door replied. “Listen, if she says I can’t let you in, I can’t let you in. That woman will have my balls if I don’t follow her orders. Come back when it’s over, buddy.”

Dante nodded. “I’ll do that.”

He turned and headed back to his rental truck. Then he looked up open stores and programmed his GPS. It might take him half the show, but he’d find a way in.

Forty minutes later, he pulled back into the Bluebird Café lot. He’d switched to cowboy boots, added a Stetson, and traded his cargos for a pair of Wranglers. And a button-down plaid shirt covered his T-shirt. Sure, he could still use a haircut. His dark curls weren’t close to military short. Not that it mattered for his missions. He found it easier to blend in if he didn’t look like the other boots on the ground in the Middle East. But without the hat, he still looked more southern Italian than American cowboy. Still, he approached the door ready to play the part.

He reached the bouncer. “One ticket for Ms. Tate’s show,” he drawled in a Southern twang that would have his Italian ancestors rolling in their graves.

“A hundred dollars,” the bouncer said. “All proceeds go to the Wounded Warrior Project. But I should tell you, she sang ‘How Do I Remember You’ already.”

“That’s not the song I came to hear.” Dante handed over the cash, the first obstacle removed, and walked into the café.

He found a seat at a corner table set for two. Then he turned his attention to the

woman on the stage.

Chrissie had traded her sequined tops for an I Love Nashville T-shirt and jeans. She looked at home on the smaller stage as she picked up an acoustic guitar and took a seat on a high stool.

“Sing it, Chrissie!” Someone close to the front called out. “Play ‘When Love Comes Second’, Chrissie!”

He’d grown accustomed to the thunderous applause she received in the larger venues. In this intimate setting, with small groups of people gathered around tables, the polite cheering seemed out of place.

She played the first few chords of her new chart-topping single. Then she stopped, and her smile faded. “I know you all came to hear my new hit. But tonight, I can’t sing that one.”

A chorus of “what?” and “you’re kidding” rang through the café, accompanied by murmurings.

“I can’t perform it for you tonight,” she continued. “Because I think I got the words all wrong.”

The crowd fell silent.

“Having the opportunity to sing for you all, it’s meant everything to me for so long. I love getting up onstage night after night and sharing my songs with you. I write from the heart. And I think you all know that by now. My lyrics are about my family, and at the same time, my music supports them. I’ve kept my eye on the prize for my family and for my fans. More songs written straight from my heart.”

“You delivered!” a voice from the crowd shouted. “Sing ‘When Love Comes Second’!”

“But that’s just it,” she said with a woeful smile. “Love shouldn’t come second. Especially not for the men and women serving our country.”

Dante was on his feet and heading for the stage as soon as the words crossed her lips. As he headed for the stairs leading to the raised section, he called out, “Are you saying love comes first, Ms. Tate?”

She turned her head to him, and her eyes widened. Judging from the surprise in her big blue eyes, Moira hadn’t told the talent that her former bodyguard had dropped by and tried to get into the show. But the former Marine was on to him now. Chrissie’s new hired muscle had abandoned her post stage right and was heading for him.

“I’ll handle this,” Chrissie called to the former Marine.

Moira stepped aside and let him slip past her. He climbed the two stairs to the stage. No doubt the Marine had seen through his disguise, too. Maybe the rest of the crowd had as well.

Either way, he was walking up there dressed as Dante the cowboy. He’d never felt so unprepared. Sure, he’d worn disguises before. But he’d never tried to win over the woman he loved while hiding behind a costume. There was a chance she’d break his heart all over again, and in front of this crowd of bona fide cowboys.

“Are you sure?” Moira asked as Chrissie raised her hands.

“Yes,” she said, her gaze fixed on him. “Don’t worry about me. I was trained in hand-to-hand combat by a Navy SEAL.”

The crowd laughed as if this was all part of the show. And maybe for her it was. Maybe she'd been lying about changing the lyrics to her new hit. Hell, for all he knew, it was a marketing ploy set in motion by his old pal, Mason. And there was only one way to find out.

“Planning to take me down, ma’am?” he asked.

Chrissie nodded and set her guitar in a nearby stand. “And you should know, cowboy, that I hit hard. So unless you plan to haul ass—”

“I’m not running away,” he said firmly. “Not this time. And not ever again. Because honey, love doesn’t come second in my world.”

“Well, I warned you,” she said, grinning at him as she stepped closer. And this wasn’t the fake grin she wore for her fans. This was the real deal.

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

He blinked under the bright lights and she took aim at his windpipe, her palm flat. His training kicked in before his mind processed the situation, and he caught her wrist. But she just kept smiling as if she'd ended up exactly where she wanted to be.

She closed the space between them and raised her free hand to his jaw. "Now it's been a while since my last training session with a SEAL, but if I remember right, when I end up here, I do this..."

She rose up on her toes and pressed her lips to his.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Chrissie ran her fingers through his hair and knocked his cowboy hat to the ground. He'd come all this way for her. Her audience could take a backseat to him for tonight. She'd always performed from the heart, and tonight was no exception. And her heart belonged to the SEAL standing before her.

"Chrissie," he murmured, breaking the kiss but keeping a hold on her wrist. His other hand had found its way to her cheek. "Honey, you're ruining my disguise."

"You don't need one," she said. "Not with me."

"I wasn't planning to do this here," he said. "Like this."

She leaned forward and whispered in his ear. "Then toss me over your shoulder, sailor, and carry me away. We can do this anywhere you'd like."

He looked out at the crowd. She followed his gaze, and the audience stared back, eyes glued to the stage as if someone had switched the channel from concert to live celebrity gossip.

Then he stepped back but kept a hold of her hands. “No, I’m not walking away until I say what I came to say. I love you, Chrissie Tate. And I’m willing to do whatever it takes to make this work.”

“Even after I told the world that there are things more important than love?” she said.

He smiled. “Well, you’ve already admitted you were wrong about that.”

The audience laughed.

“I was,” she said.

“We can make this work with the time we have,” he said, his expression taking a turn toward serious. “I’ll fly to meet you wherever you are when I have leave. I’m not much of a writer. Not like you. But I swear, I’ll send letters or emails every damn day. It doesn’t matter where I go. And afterward, I’ll always come home to you. It won’t be perfect. But I’ll give you all I have to give—my heart, my trust—and I swear I’ll be as loyal to you as I am to my team and my country.”

“We’ll make it work,” she affirmed. “I know we will, because I won’t let you take a backseat to my career. You’re in my heart now, a part of my life and my m

usic.”

She paused and turned to the crowd. Raising her voice, though she knew that everyone in the famous café had caught every word, she called, “Now, I know many of you don’t recognize him with his clever disguise, but I’d like to introduce you to

my former bodyguard, Dante Raske, a proud member of the U.S. Navy SEALs.”

The audience applauded, and at least one person called out a heartfelt “welcome.”

“Now, I have a secret to share with you all, that I’m guessing will be out there on Twitter and all soon,” she continued. “My former bodyguard taught me a lot more than self-defense.”

A woman in the back of the intimate performance space let out a loud “woot!”

“That’s exactly how I feel when I’m with him.” She stole a quick glance at the man who was watching her as if the audience didn’t exist. He looked like the man who’d reluctantly stepped into her music video in those jeans and boots. But she could see past the clothes to the man she loved. “Because this man taught me how to open my heart to love. I got it wrong the first time I penned a song about him. But Dante, if you let me, I promise you, I’ll get it right the second time around.”

“Oh, I’ll let you, honey.” He pulled her into his arms. “You can write as many songs as you want about me. On two conditions.”

She raised an eyebrow as the crowd fell silent again. They were probably just as eager to hear his demands.

“First, no tractors in the songs you write about us.” His hands ran down her back. He held tight to her hips, drew her close, and dropped his voice. “But I’m happy to serve as your muse for the sex and love songs.”

She nodded as someone in the front row gasped. “No tractors. I can do that. And the second condition?”

“Honey, there are three little words I’m still waiting to hear,” he said, staring down at

her.

She saw the faintest flicker of uncertainty lingering in his dark eyes, and she knew what to say. She ran her hands over his chest and up to his face. “Dante, I love you. No matter where you go, know that I’ll be waiting at home for you. Always.”

Epilogue

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

“I can’t call the plumber.” Chrissie stood in Dante’s narrow kitchen and stared at the water shooting out of the sink.

“I understand where you’re coming from, but I believe it is your best bet,” Cade said in his deep, dead-sexy voice. Lucia was a very lucky woman. Not that Chrissie would trade her SEAL for a baritone. But she had debated about asking Cade if he’d considered singing when he left the teams.

“You’re SEALs!” She shot a pointed look at Cade and then at Ronan, who stood on her other side. “You’re supposed to be able to handle any situation.”

“Well, there is one option,” the redheaded SEAL said.

“Which is?” She glanced at the clock. Dante was due home from his training exercise soon. They had exactly seventy minutes before she needed to leave for the airport and rejoin her tour.

“Come on guys, I’m desperate. I wouldn’t have dragged you away from your newborn.” She pointed at Cade. “Or you from Cassie, if I wasn’t out of other options.”

Ronan shook his head. “He trusts you, Chrissie. You know that. You’ll have to call the plumber.”

“I want to hear plan B.”

“We remove the sink,” Cade said flatly.

“That’s all you’ve got?” She threw her arms up in the air. “Take it out? How do you survive when you’re deployed?”

“Chrissie, if I thought shooting the damn thing was an option,” Ronan said. “I would have brought my gun.”

...

Dante walked into his home and dropped his gear. Two of his teammates were dripping wet in his kitchen. Water covered the floor, and his tool belt was spread out on the table.

“Trying to steal my kitchen sink?” he asked mildly.

His teammates turned around. And yeah, both of them looked guilty as sin.

“About time,” Cade muttered, setting a wrench down on the table. “Chrissie bypassed the plumber and called us when your sink started pumping water into your kitchen.”

The country starlet who’d captured his heart walked into the room. “I don’t need a plumber when I have a team of SEALs on speed dial. Admit it, Cade, you liked having something to do that didn’t involve changing a diaper.”

Cade just shook his head. “Speaking of diapers, I should probably get back to Lucia and Max. She might need me.”

His teammate slapped him on the shoulder and muttered, “Damn good thing you came home before we hauled that thing into the yard.”

Dante let out a laugh and glanced at Ronan. “You were planning to tear it out.”

“It was either that or shoot it,” Chrissie said.

“Next time, honey, you have my blessing to call the plumber.”

“You should call him now,” Ronan said as he pulled out his car key and headed for the door. “This has been fun. I always like hearing from you, Ms. Tate.”

“That’s Raske,” Dante said, knowing his teammate was giving him a hard time.

“Not to her fans,” the redheaded SEAL grinned. “To them, you are Mr. Tate.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Dante slapped him on the back as he walked out the door, hoping he took the message. Don’t turn around. Keep moving to your car.

Dante didn’t have a clue what was wrong with the kitchen sink. But he knew his wife was about to get very, very wet.

“Chrissie—”

“I’ll call the plumber,” she said with a sigh.

“Not just yet.”

Source Creation Date: July 4, 2025, 8:10 am

She turned to him, water spraying at her back.

“First, I want you to lose the clothes and pick up the tool belt,” he said. “We still have an hour until I need to take you to the airport for your flight to... Where are you going this time?”

“Hawaii,” she said, her gaze moving up and down his body.

“Of course,” he muttered. “You’re headed to paradise and I’m off to, well, let’s just say I think I’m going someplace a little more landlocked this time.”

She nodded, her smile fading. “You’re going to stay safe out there.”

“Always.” He picked up the tool belt and held it out to her. “But before I go, I want you to take off your clothes, everything right down to your panties. And I want you to put on this tool belt. We’re going to play a round of the Navy SEAL and the plumber.”

“I don’t think I’ve heard of that one,” she muttered, pulling her shirt over her head.

His gaze headed south to her breasts. “We need to keep things fresh and exciting.”

She nodded solemnly as she added her jeans and thong to the pile of discarded clothes. “You know, I think that approach might be working for my parents. They seemed happy again after their second honeymoon in Mexico. The time to relax, just the two of them, helped.”

Yeah, Dante had a feeling that had more to do with time in general. Her father had finally come to terms with his grief. Plus, talking out their problems with a therapist seemed to help. But—

“Honey, we’re not going to talk about your family right now. Or your manager.” He moved closer and placed his hands on her hips. Slowly, he turned her around. “Right now, I want you to place your hands on the edge of the sink and let me love you.”

She obeyed, allowing the water to splash her bare breasts. In position, she glanced over her shoulder. “You know, that sounds like the beginning to a country song.”

“Does it?” He moved behind her and ran his hand between her legs. “How does the rest go?”

“Teach me a lesson, cowboy.”