

CHAPTER 1



*I*t was late fall in southwestern Oklahoma, the time of year when the air was crisp in the evenings and the leaves had just started to turn their annual shades of red, orange, and yellow. Late one Friday morning, Army Major Sabrina Warrick noticed the leaves on the tree outside her window and sighed, knowing winter was just around the corner. She looked away from the window and glanced distractedly at the mound of paperwork piled high on the gleaming wood of her well-worn cherry desk. She'd been staring at it without actually seeing it for most of the morning. As she wearily pushed it aside and looked at her watch, the door to her office suddenly swung open and Major Grace Hill poked her pretty blonde head in. They'd been friends a long time and were currently stationed at Fort Sill.

"How about breaking for lunch, Sabrina?" Grace asked, a little too cheerily for Sabrina's sour mood.

What the heck, she needed to talk to her friend, may as well be over food. "Sure, I'm not getting much done here anyway. Maybe a break will help." She sighed. Stopping at her assistant Sharon's desk on the way out, she informed her, "I'll be at the commissary having lunch."

"Okay, Major Warrick. I'll see you later," Sharon replied with a smile as she looked up from her filing.

The women strolled the distance from their office building to the post commissary. There was a small café there that served the best blackened chicken salads in town, and that was where they chose to spend their lunch hour.

"What's up with you, Sabrina? Something is definitely off," Grace asked in a concerned voice. "Is it Paul?"

Grace and Sabrina had been friends since they joined ROTC years ago in Spokane, Washington. Sabrina hailed from Vancouver and Grace had been raised in Portland. They managed to follow each other to the same posts throughout their careers, even doing a tour of Iraq at the same time. Grace usually arrived at the new post a few months ahead of Sabrina, so she was able to fill her friend in on the hottest men in the area by the time Sabrina arrived.

Sabrina took a sip of her iced tea and pushed back a strand of her brunette hair before answering. "Paul cheated again. I'm done this time. I see absolutely no future for us." Her green eyes flashed with anger as she looked at Grace.

Grace looked at her friend with understanding. "I don't blame you, and I know it's taken a long time for you to get to this point. I'm so sorry."

"The first few times I told myself it was no big deal because we weren't serious; now it's different. Every time he swears it won't happen again, but it always does. I pity the poor girl who marries him. It won't be me. I'm just glad we're at different posts so I don't have to run into him every day."

"Good girl," Grace said as their salads were served. She thanked the young waitress and poured a generous serving of honey mustard dressing on her salad while listening.

"I've made it this far without a man. I was doing fine before Paul, and I'll do fine after him. And I always have my career." Sabrina's defiance was a bit lacking in conviction as she dipped a forkful of chicken into a cup of vinaigrette and took a bite.

"Tell yourself that on a cold winter's night when you're all alone in your bed, my friend."

"Good morning, Majors," Colonel Kathy Lindsey interrupted as she walked by.

"Good afternoon, Colonel." Sabrina forced a smile as she greeted her superior.

"Good afternoon, Colonel," Grace piped up as she also acknowledged the other woman.

"Enjoy your lunch. It's good to see both of you."

As she walked away on the arm of her handsome husband, Sabrina remarked, "Now, there's a woman who has it all. She's moved up the ranks, well-respected, great husband, and two adorable kids. How'd she get so lucky?"

"We just haven't met Mr. Right yet."

"I guess not." Sabrina wondered if she'd ever meet Mr. Right. "And you know, the sad thing about Paul and me is that I'm beginning to doubt I ever really loved him. I think he was—how should I say it?—a suitable prospect for a husband. But there were no sparks, you know what I mean? Maybe not for him, either. Maybe that explains all of his extracurricular affairs."

"Really, and you put up with his little affairs all this time anyway, even though you weren't crazy in love with him?" Grace asked in awe. "I just thought it was because you were so much in love that you chose to overlook the other women. I sure misjudged that one."

"Like I said, he was a suitable choice. We're both career-oriented, both Army, I don't know. I'm mad as hell he cheated again. I'm sick of his little guilt gifts and I just think I'm ready to move on from it all. It's the same old scene, time and again—he cheats, he either gets caught or he confesses. Then he's all lovey-dovey for a while, begs me to forgive him, and it's wine and roses until the next fling."

"And if you marry him, nothing will change," Grace remarked, taking a sip of her Diet Coke.

"Exactly right, and I've decided I deserve more. I deserve someone who loves me and only me, if someone like that even exists. I want to be crazy mad in love. In the meantime, I have my career."

"Your career won't keep you warm on a cold winter's night, Sabrina," Grace reminded her again.

"I know, but I won't settle for less. My mind is made up. Colonel Paul Andrews and I are finished, once and for all."

"What are we doing this weekend, then? You're not staying in if I have any say in the matter," Grace informed her friend. "It's time for you to start a new chapter."

"I don't know. What would you like to do?" Sabrina was uninterested as she pushed her salad around on her plate.

"We could go to the casino or bowling; we haven't done either in a while."

"Okay, call me tomorrow. I'd better get back now if I want to go home sometime tonight." Sabrina honestly couldn't have cared less if she went out or stayed home that weekend.

She walked back to her office to face the never-ending stack of paperwork once again. Stopping at Sharon's cluttered desk, she asked, "Were there any messages for me?"

Sharon looked up from the stack of manila folders covering her desk and, taking the pencil out of her mouth she'd been chewing nervously, said, "Colonel Andrews called again."

Sharon's dark hair fell just to her shoulders, and with her pretty figure and constant smile she was actually very attractive. Sabrina had often wondered why she didn't date more.

"If he calls again, tell him I am unavailable."

"Yes, ma'am, I will," Sharon replied as Sabrina walked into her office to face the afternoon, slamming the door behind her.

Sitting down at her desk once again, she began to wade through the paperwork, putting all thoughts of Paul out of her mind until she glanced at the vase of red roses staring at her from the corner of the desk. She picked it up and dumped the whole thing in the

trash, knowing full well they were another one of his guilt gifts. The only time he ever sent flowers was after he'd strayed. It wasn't long before his picture, staring at her from the other corner, followed the flowers into the trash.

"I'm done," she told the things sticking out of her trash can. "Totally done, finished, through, no more!"

At seven she wearily locked her office door and walked to the parking lot toward her car. She'd fallen in love with the white Mazda and bought it on impulse. She hadn't regretted the decision as Paul had told her she would. It drove like a dream and came equipped with everything she needed. As she drove across the post to her quarters, she told herself she really needed to get a life.

Letting herself into her empty apartment, she looked at the mess she'd left that morning. She hurriedly picked up the clothes strewn across the floor and threw them into a laundry basket, put the dishes in the dishwasher, and walked into the bedroom. She stripped off her fatigues and went into the bathroom. Filling the tub with warm water, she decided on lavender bath salts. She went into the kitchen and poured herself a glass of French Lick cherry wine, a gift from a friend in Indiana, stopping to water the lone plant in the windowsill before going back into the bathroom.

Stripping out of her undergarments, she checked the water temperature in the tub before sinking slowly down into the warm, aromatic water. Taking a sip of the wine and closing her eyes, she leaned her head back onto her bath pillow and tried to erase the tensions of the day. The enormous workload she had right now coupled with the latest dalliance of her lover was enough to stress anyone out, even the level-headed, no-nonsense Major Sabrina Warrick.

She thought back over her time with Paul. Major Paul Andrews, passably handsome, all business-like, career-driven playboy. The sex hadn't been all that great, come to think of it. So, what did all those other women see in him? A chance to become the wife of an officer climbing the ranks? Why did he keep coming back to her?

Because she was safe, someone who shared his interests, his career goals? Well, she no longer wanted to be his safe port or his *suitable* girlfriend.

No, she wanted more. She deserved more. She merited the love of a man who wanted to be with her because he enjoyed what she had to offer, loved her laughter, thought she was fun, not because she was safe. Sighing, she wondered if such a man even existed for her.

After the relaxing soak, she got out of the tub and dried off with a thick towel, then pulled a long T-shirt out of her dresser drawer and slipped it over her head, threw on a pair of shorts, and went back into the kitchen to heat a frozen dinner in the microwave. Settling herself on the navy-blue sofa in her living room with the plate of steaming pasta and shrimp, she flipped through the channels, settling on *Pretty Woman*. She loved Richard Gere and watched all of his old movies whenever she could catch one. Now, *that* was one sexy man.

When the chick flick was over, she rose from the couch and padded to the bedroom. *Why do the heroines always get their man in the end?* She pondered this as she folded back the blue and yellow floral comforter on her antique iron bed and slid between the cool sheets. *Will I ever get my man?*

She fell into a deep sleep and began dreaming about a drop-dead gorgeous man with the most beautiful brown eyes she had ever seen. They looked like huge chocolate drops. He was kissing her and caressing her, bringing her to a state of fevered desire. He whispered sweet nothings in her ear and told her softly he loved her just before taking them both on a journey to a destination unknown to her. He called her his babygirl, kissed every inch of her body, and made sure she knew she was cherished before he allowed himself pleasure. It was all about her. She'd never felt the kind of sensations the man in her dream created, definitely not with Paul. There was a sense of dominance in the man, forcing her to submit to his advances.

He touched her in all the right places, with his hands and then with his lips, trailing kisses down and up her entire body before stopping in the middle and surprising her by pulling her lace panties down with his teeth. She shivered as his teeth grazed her leg on the way down. He slipped them off the rest of the way and threw them to the floor. Then, he moved up her right leg, kissing and nibbling until he reached her most sensitive spot, already swollen and needing attention. And he didn't disappoint, either. His tongue began to work its magic on her clit, making her moan and writhe in pleasure. Her hips arched up, encouraging him and he kept it up, bringing her to a fevered pitch, but just when she was ready to go over the edge he stopped. She moaned and pouted.

"No pouting, pretty lady," the man said as he rolled her over and gave her bottom a swat. She jumped, startled.

"B-but, you stopped," she said, defending herself.

"Yes, I did. I couldn't have you coming too soon, now, could I?" he replied as he moved up to kiss her lips, the taste of her own juices on his tongue.

She allowed herself to relax and let him finish what he'd started in his own way. This was so different from what she was used to. She was lucky to even have an orgasm before Paul was finished. If this dream man wanted to prolong her pleasure, who was she to argue? After all, it was her dream. She'd made him up in her sleepy mind as her perfect man.

And finish it he certainly did. He caressed her body again with kisses, starting with the top of her head and ending at her toes and then back up again. A thick finger slipped between her folds and she immediately gushed all over it, aroused insanelly.

The man chuckled and said, "I think someone is ready for something else."

She moaned in response and spread her legs further apart, as if to welcome him. He took full advantage of the position and thrust his rock-hard cock hard into her waiting pussy. Dream Sabrina wrapped her legs around his waist in a way awake Sabrina would

never do—or had never done. She moved with her fantasy partner as strong sensations enveloped her. When he smacked her ass, it made her nip at his neck, which spurred him on even more until both of them were screaming in ecstasy, riding the waves that seemed to never end.

And when they both came back to shore, he rolled over, pulling her with him so that she was lying on top of him, her head near his heart. He caressed her hair and whispered over and over again how special she was to him and how much he loved her.

She had never had that afterglow with Paul—or any other lover, for that matter. It was always wham, bam, thank you, ma'am, time to go to sleep now with Paul. She wondered if he did that with all his other women. Oh, well, who cared. She had dream lover now. If only he were real...

She could almost feel him lying next to her as she awoke to sheets soaked with perspiration, her body aching with desire, wondering if such a man truly existed. She'd had similar dreams about this man before but never quite as vivid as the one tonight. She'd felt every touch, every kiss, heard each whisper, and had definitely climaxed. Wow, that was some dream! It took a long while for her to get back to sleep, but when she did she slept like a baby.

The next morning, she awakened still thinking of the dream as she made a pot of French vanilla coffee. After pouring her first cup of the sweet, steaming liquid, she sat down to read the *Lawton Constitution*. The ringing of the phone startled her. Who was calling her on a Saturday morning? It was her day off, for God's sake.

"Major Warrick," she said distractedly.

"Hey, it's Grace. I'll swing by around seven."

"What?" she asked, vaguely remembering something about agreeing to go out that night.

"Bowling, remember? Project get-Sabrina-out-of-the-house?" Grace said in exasperation.

"Oh, yeah, see you at seven, then."

"Don't sound so thrilled."

"Sorry, I'll be ready, and I promise to try and have fun throwing a ball down an alley."

"Just pretend the pins are Paul," Grace suggested teasingly.

"Now, there's an idea. Actually, on second thought, let's go to the casino. What do you say? There should be a band playing tonight in the bar." Sabrina actually managed to laugh as she suggested it.

"Whatever you want to do. It's your night. See you at seven."

She finished her chores and ran some errands, stopping at the mall before she went home. Maybe she would treat herself to something new in honor of this new chapter she was supposed to be starting.

That evening, she chose a pair of stylish straight-legged jeans and the new soft blue sweater she'd bought at Dillard's that afternoon. Donning her western boots, an Oklahoma must, she looked in the mirror and decided to leave her hair down, then added Indian jewelry to complete the outfit.

Eat your heart out, Paul. You aren't the only game in town. Two can play at this game.



"YOU LOOK GREAT, SABRINA." Grace approved of her friend's outfit when she picked her up as promised at seven sharp.

"Thanks. I went shopping today, found this sweater at the mall, and thought it was cute. I love the slightly off-the-shoulder look, just in case I meet a guy and want to look sexy." She laughed dramatically as she added, "Now, let's go see what kind of trouble we can get into. Maybe we'll at least win a little money."

"You never know, Sabrina, you might just meet Mr. Right tonight."

"Somehow, I highly doubt that." Sabrina laughed at the thought.

The two friends arrived at one of the bigger casinos in the area. They'd been there a few times, and as casinos went, this one was definitely a nice one, with modern slots, table games, and a dance

floor with a live band in one of the many bars. There were also several restaurants. It was very clean and well-kept, with a fun atmosphere. As Sabrina was looking around to decide where to grab a bite, Grace let out a low whistle.

"Would you look at that?"

"What?" Sabrina asked, looking up. Her gaze followed Grace's and what she saw completely took her breath away. "Wow!" She found herself staring at the sexiest man she'd ever seen. Broad-shouldered, tall, and well-built with wavy light brown hair and a smile that would melt any girl's heart. The sandy-haired friend with him wasn't bad, either.

"I could get close to that!" Grace sighed as she watched the two men walk toward them, stopping at a blackjack table.

"Don't stare, Grace. Act normal," Sabrina hissed.

They pretended not to notice the two most gorgeous men in the place were sitting just a few feet from where they stood.

Sabrina watched for a short while. The men seemed to be winning.

"Want to join the game or go eat?" Grace asked.

"Oh, we should eat. I don't want them to think we're interested or anything."

"Good job!" Grace gave her the high five and rolled her eyes.

"What?"

"But we *are* interested."

"Come on, before you get us both in trouble. Besides, I'm hungry and I want to eat and play the slots before the music starts," Sabrina said as she pulled her friend into a nearby sports bar.

The two men at the table were forgotten for the time being as they found a table and looked over the menu.

They had just ordered when the two men they'd seen before walked in and sat at the bar. They were by far the sexiest men Sabrina or Grace had ever seen. Just sitting in the same room as the brown-haired one was making the normally calm Major Warrick extremely nervous—and wet.

"Hello, girls. Mind if we join you, or are you waiting for someone?" the sandy-haired man asked as he suddenly stood next to Grace.

Grace looked at Sabrina, who nodded.

"Sure." Grace smiled her sexiest smile.

"I'm Scott, by the way." Scott was just as tall, muscular, and good-looking as his friend, but Sabrina's gaze instantly fell back to the other man. There was just something about him.

"And I'm Ben," the sexy man with the brown wavy hair said, flashing a smile that sent shivers up and down Sabrina's spine. He extended his right hand.

She took it, saying, "I'm Sabrina, and this is Grace, nice to meet you both." The simple touch of his hand was enough to make her want to get closer to him, much closer. Her hand felt as though it had been scorched as she pulled it away.

He sat next to her in the booth and the four of them began to talk.

"Could we buy you a drink?" Grace's new friend asked.

"Thanks, but we've already ordered." Grace looked at Scott, laughing.

"Next one is on us," he answered with a wink.

The waitress returned with their drinks and took the men's orders. When she left, Sabrina said, "I hear there's a pretty good band playing in the dance bar tonight. We were thinking about heading over there later, after we eat and try our hand at the slots."

"Really? That sounds like a plan. Maybe we'll check them out, too." His chocolate brown eyes seemed to twinkle when he talked.

"I'd like to watch you girls play the slots, myself. Do you have much luck, usually?" the other man asked.

Chocolate eyes added, "We can make it a competition. Whoever wins the most at slots buys the first round of drinks later in the bar."

"You're on. Right, Grace?" Sabrina looked at her friend.

"Right, let's show 'em what we can do, girlfriend."

"I think we're in trouble, man." Scott chuckled as he looked at Ben.

"We'll see about that! I've been known to get a hefty chunk of change out of a one-armed bandit in my day."

The girls laughed.

"You know it's all luck, right? You have to be in the right place at the right time to beat the slots," Sabrina said as she took a sip of her daiquiri.

"Maybe, then again, maybe not," Ben answered with a smile that set her pulse racing again. And then she knew what it was. His eyes. There was something about them. What was it?

She didn't have time to ponder it as the food arrived and they all began to eat, anxious now to get to the machines.

They decided where to meet, after the meal was finished and they'd had another drink. The girls excused themselves to visit the ladies' room and agreed to meet the men in the slot section closest to the dance bar.

When they reached the restroom, Sabrina turned to Grace and said, "Thanks for talking me into coming out tonight. I haven't had this much fun in ages."

"I haven't, either. But let's not tell them too much about ourselves. Okay?"

"I agree." The girls knew from experience some men were intimidated by a female military officer.

"Aren't they hunks, both of them, though?"

"Oh, yeah, especially Ben," Sabrina said dreamily.

"I prefer the blond look, myself." Grace giggled as she walked to the mirror and touched up her makeup.

"That's good, since I have my eye on Ben." The mere thought of sharing a bed with the wavy-haired man was almost more than Sabrina could bear.

When they got to the slots the two men were already there waiting for them.

"Name your poison," Scott said as he chose his machine.

"After you." Ben waited until the girls sat down, then he picked the machine next to Sabrina.

They played the machines for a while, with Sabrina the biggest winner. She'd come out ninety dollars ahead. "Well, looks like the drinks are on me," she said with a grin after they'd cashed out their winnings.

"Sounds like the band is starting. Ready to head over there?" Scott asked.

They all nodded and walked together to the dance bar, where Ben found a table for them. The server came to take their order, and they all relaxed, talking in between songs when they could hear each other.

"Why haven't we seen you two ladies around before?" Ben inquired as he looked at Sabrina with that same sexy smile that had first drawn her to him.

"We've not been here for a while." She returned the smile shyly.

"We keep pretty busy with work," Grace added, looking at Scott.

"I hear that. We've been putting in all kinds of overtime at the plant," Scott replied.

"So, you both work at Goodyear?" Sabrina asked.

"Yeah, like most folks around here who aren't lucky enough to get out of town."

"What do you girls do?" Ben asked.

"Uh, we both work on post," Grace answered vaguely as she took a sip of the Coke that had just arrived. She'd cut herself off after two drinks at dinner since she was driving.

"Ah, another place a lot of folks around here work," Scott observed. He, too, was drinking a soft drink.

Sabrina was incredibly intrigued by Ben. He had the most gorgeous brown eyes she had ever seen, like huge drops of chocolate... almost identical to the man in her dream. That was it! Oh, my God! He was the man she had been dreaming about. How could that be? She began to imagine his hard-working hands roaming her body, rocking her world, taking her to the ends of the earth and

back... *Sabrina, get a grip*, she told herself as she found herself staring into those beautiful eyes again. It was only a dream, a coincidence that he looked like her fantasy lover, wasn't it?

The other three continued with light banter as they enjoyed the music while Sabrina tried to concentrate on what they were all saying. It wasn't easy with 'chocolate eyes' sitting next to her,

"How about it, Sabrina? Join them?" she heard him ask.

It took her a minute to realize that he was asking her to dance and that Grace and Scott were already on the floor.

"Sure," she said as she took his hand. They stood and walked out onto the hardwood.

"You were a million miles away there for a minute," he observed as he took her into his arms and whirled her around to the music. He was, surprisingly, a very good dancer.

"I guess I was, sorry, must have been the drinks. I don't normally drink much other than wine."

He chuckled. "Well, you're back now and in my arms. What could be better than that? This is fun. I've enjoyed meeting you girls tonight."

"I agree. I didn't even want to come out. Grace talked me into it. It was either here or bowling."

"You bowl? Scott and I are on a league. The four of us will have to make a bowling date sometime."

"You're on," she said, blushing.

"So, why wouldn't a pretty lady like you not want to come out on a Saturday night? I would think your weekends would be booked solid with dates," he boldly queried.

Sabrina blushed again. "I've had some personal things going on. A bad relationship just ended, and I would have been content to stay in and go through a gallon of chocolate chip ice cream, but Grace wouldn't hear of it."

"I'm sorry, but on the other hand, not really. It means you're free. Can I call you?"

She was quiet for several minutes. When the song ended, she

looked up into his brown eyes and replied, "I think I'd like that, Ben."

And long before she was ready, the evening was coming to an end.

Scott and Grace had exchanged cell phone numbers already as Ben asked Sabrina for hers. She gave it to him and watched as he put it in his phone. She did the same with his.

"I'll call you soon. Count on it, Sabrina," Ben said smoothly as he waved goodbye.

"That'd be great. I'll talk to you soon." She flashed him her sexiest smile.

Once they were on the road, Grace said, "Wow, Sabrina, that Scott is one sexy hunk of man. I'd love to see him again."

"And I could get real cozy with Ben, if you know what I mean," Sabrina remarked thoughtfully. *What would be the harm in a brief fling with a sexy local factory worker?* A blue-collar lover might be just what she needed right now to get over the feelings of worthlessness her ex's endless cheating gave her.

Grace glanced at her friend. "Sabrina, that doesn't exactly sound like something you'd do. Are you really considering it?"

"Maybe, we'll just have to see now, won't we? All I can say is, Ben Foster is one hell of a sexy man."

After her friend had dropped her off at home, she prepared for bed with a smile as she remembered what he'd said. *I wonder if he really will call.* She was just settling in between the cool sheets when her cell rang. She answered sleepily, "Hello."

"Hey, Sabrina, it's Ben, calling to say goodnight."

"Hi there. When you said you'd call soon, you weren't kidding." She giggled. "I'm glad to hear from you so soon."

He chuckled in return. "I had a great time tonight, just had to call and tell you I'm looking forward to seeing you again."

"I had fun too. We'll definitely get together soon. Call me."

"You can count on that, babygirl. Sweet dreams."

"Goodnight."

Babygirl?

She soon fell asleep, dreaming that a handsome, wavy-haired man with huge, velvety chocolate brown eyes was sharing her bed. He kissed her lips, then moved down her body, nuzzled her neck, stopping to whisper love words in her ear as he'd done in her dream the night before. Once again, he made passionate love to her and she found herself submitting to his every demand. She awoke, alone again, more determined than ever to make this particular dream become a reality, and the sooner the better.