

**Ranger's Reprieve**  
**Episode One by C.A. Szarek**

A bullet whizzed by his head and he ducked. "Son of a bitch!"

"Jesus, Jess, are you hit?" Chuck breathed.

"No, but it'd be nice if you covered my six, dammit."

The guy had the nerve to laugh, but he patted the side of his rifle, an MK-16. "Bertha got it."

Too bad the laugh was obliterated by utter shock, and the red starburst on his friend's forehead demanded all Jess' attention.

His fellow Ranger gaped and keeled over. Blood spatter hit Jess' face, and he hadn't realized it. Then the yelling from the rest of their team started, and returning fire and—

"Dammit!" He popped up, panting. His bare torso was covered in sweat. Jess' brow was too, if the dripping in his eyes was any indication.

*Eyes...dammit.* The instant vacancy in Chuck's brown ones would haunt him for the rest of his life.

*Freaking dreams.* Well, his stupid therapist called them night terrors—like he was five years old. Scratch that, no kid should have to see what Jess had.

Problem was—where he'd come from, three tours of duty later—it'd happened. Seeing dead kids. Dead women. Innocents in a country ravaged by war. *Been there. Done that.* Add fodder for the nightmares. That'd just f'd him up even more.

Discharge after his own injury had made it worse. He was *home*. Too bad the desert felt more like it than the bungalow his great aunt had left him in podunkville west Texas. Damn good thing he had it, though. He hadn't wanted to go home to Tallahassee. Just couldn't. Pity in his family and friends' eyes would've bothered him more than the supposed PTSD.

Jess opened and closed his prosthetic hand. He'd fallen asleep with it on again. What was left of his upper left arm—a few inches past his biceps—ached.

He threw his legs over the side of the bed and groaned. Unhooking his new arm only took a few seconds. After being kicked loose from physical therapy for almost six months, he was an old pro. He rolled his shoulder and winced.

*Damn, that hurts.* Tingles shot upward, but it felt good, too. Jess sighed and glanced at his cell. He pushed the button to light the thing up, and the time glared—03:26 hours.

*Shit. Again.*

Would he ever get a good night's sleep?

Might as well shower, he was covered in sweat anyway.

Noise at the front of the small house made him tense and want to reach for a gun. Then there was thumping and a tumble that could be someone rooting around. Jess had a feeling he knew what it was, and sighed instead of getting his Glock.

*Not. Again.*

Cursing under his breath with enough variety to make his whole team of Rangers proud—not to mention a trucker or two—he padded out to the front door and whipped it open. Ran his gaze along as much of the wrap-around porch he could see in the dim light the lamp over the door threw out.

A whine snatched his attention to the three front steps.

Jess' eyes darted to the blondish ball of fur at his feet. "You!"

The dog wagged her tail.

He ignored the big brown eyes and the adorable few pieces of fur that overhung one, partially obscuring it.

"You don't live here," Jess growled at the dog.

"Shelby!" The female voice startled him, but he did his best not to show it.

*Show* was the right word because when he glanced at the owner of said blonde mutt, he saw that his neighbor. Lindy, or Lindsey or something with an L, was barely dressed.

Her oversized tee had Princess Leia printed on it, and stopped mid-thigh. What a nice pair they were, muscular, as if she exercised by running after her stupid canine. The other pair—her breasts—was fantastic, too. They had a good bounce going on as she ascended the stairs to his porch. No bra, because he could see the outline of her nipples.

His neighbor's long red hair was loose and messy, and dancing with her movements.

Jess had never noticed how hot she was before.

"I'm so sorry, Mr. Monroe," she breathed and grabbed the small dog. "Bad, Shelby!"

The little furball wagged her tail.

She hiked Shelby to one hip, which made that shirt ride up.

He had to swallow and avert his gaze. Her underwear would be showing at any moment. Unless she wasn't wearing any. Which would be better *and* worse.

"She cried and had to go out. Woke me up from a dead sleep. I let her out then she ran over—" His pretty neighbor's eyes rose from her dog, but instead of landing on his face, they darted to where his left arm used to be. Stayed locked there, too.

"Just get your damn dog, and keep her away from my place," Jess growled.

## Episode 2

By Valerie Twombly

Jess slammed the front door much harder than he'd meant. He knew he came off as a complete jerk but seriously didn't give a rat's ass. He was tired, he was cranky, and now thanks to his neighbor he was horny.

He made his way to the kitchen and whipped open the fridge, reaching for the quart of organic milk. Not bothering with a glass, he twisted the little plastic cap off and brought the container to his lips. The cold liquid flowed down his throat and helped ease the burning dryness that always accompanied his nightmares. After several large gulps, he wiped his mouth and placed the milk back on the shelf.

Now that he was wide-awake, he sat at the table and stared at the clock on the stove. The power had gone out a few days ago, and the damn digital numbers blinked like a neon light in the darkness. He shoved his fingers through his hair and realized he was shaking, and his heart was in overdrive. A slow, deep breath in just like his therapist had told him.

*I am at peace. I am at peace.*

Exhale.

Slowly, his heartbeat came back to normal, and the vision of her nipples came into view. He wondered how they would taste. How her body would feel beneath his, but then he remembered how she'd looked at the empty space where his arm should have been. No sane woman would want a guy like him.

Half a man, that's all he was, and what did he have to offer? Nights filled with thrashing and screaming in bed and not the fun kind either. He would do well to hire himself a hooker, get a little pussy, and ease the ache between his legs. His dreams of having a wife and kids had died on that battlefield along with part of his soul. There was no getting that back. Normal would never be part of his vocabulary again.

Pushing himself to his feet, he stretched. "Might as well get that shower now." In a few more hours, he would head out for the thirty-minute drive to the Paws for Veterans facility. He'd received a call a couple of days ago, letting him know they had a dog they thought would be a perfect match for him. The coordinator emailed him a photo of a chocolate lab named Java. Part of him wondered if this female would shun him as well, but dogs weren't known for judging people. He prayed this worked. He'd heard a lot of good things about the program, and lord knew he really needed to get his shit together. There were days he couldn't leave the house due to his panic attacks. If this dog gave him even a small sense of normalcy, he'd take it.

Episode Three  
By Luanna Stewart

Lindsey Marshall rolled over on her bed, again, and punched her pillow, again. What the hell was wrong with the guy? It wasn't her fault Shelby had taken a liking to him. God knows why. Sure, he was gorgeous, but he wasn't exactly putting out friendly signals. And she doubted dogs were swayed by chiseled features and killer bods.

Except for that arm.

Shit, she'd been staring again. Her curiosity would be her downfall. She just wanted to know the story. And what it felt like, or didn't, as the case may be. Asking deeply personal questions in the middle of the night when they were both half-dressed, and not in bed together, was, as her daddy always said, ill advised.

She flopped onto her back and knew it was hopeless. She couldn't get the image out of her head. Not the whole missing arm business. The other, toned muscle, smooth skin, damn near perfect, business.

She flicked on her bedside light and stared at her phone. Four o'clock. Her coffee maker was programmed to switch on in two and a half hours. There was no way in Hades she could wait that long for caffeine. She climbed out of bed, pulled on a pair of running shorts, and shuffled into the kitchen. Shelby thumped her tail from her bed in the corner.

"Yeah, good morning to you, troublemaker." Luckily for the mutt, she was the cutest thing ever, and so it was easy to overlook her bad manners. Volunteering at the shelter came with the risk of wanting to bring home a pet. Shelby had caught her eye on a day when she was feeling particularly lonely. And just last week she'd been mightily tempted to adopt the cutest calico kitten.

She switched on the coffee maker and headed for the bathroom. Finished with her shower, a cup of java in hand, she stood in front of her closet and considered what to wear. She had to fill in for someone at Paws for Veterans, so her usual working attire might not be appropriate. She'd take her gym clothes and change before heading to her first class. She pulled on skinny jeans and a cotton tunic then examined the effect in the mirror. Put together but casual. Stylish but approachable. Heck, who was she kidding, they were clean.

After taking Shelby for a walk, on the leash so there'd be no more forced interactions with the grumpy guy next door, she sat at the table and reviewed the info she'd been given from Paws for Vets. Only one meeting scheduled for the morning, an amputee who'd recently moved to the area. She gazed in the direction of her cute neighbor. He might benefit from a companion dog. Maybe she should mention something the next time they ran into each other.

Or maybe not.

Episode Four  
By Kishan Paul

Lindsey sat cross-legged on the concrete floor in one of the training rooms of Paws for Veterans. A beautiful chocolate lab lay next to her with her head in her lap. Her eyes were closed as she brushed her thick coat. In the hour she'd been there, the owner of the agency had given her a tour and described in detail the service they provided. Rescue dogs, many from the very shelter she volunteered at, were brought here, trained, and then connected to soldiers injured in combat.

Considering she once worked as a trainer in a similar facility back in her teenage years, she pretty much knew how the place worked and what it stood for. The pay had sucked but the experience had been invaluable. That summer job was what cemented her decision to become a veterinarian. It was also why she had just volunteered to help train Java and his new owner for the next couple of weeks.

The dog planted a paw on her lap. She grinned and brushed it. "Today you're going to meet your daddy."

Java pulled her ears back and stared up at her with her dark brown eyes, as if looking for reassurance.

"I bet he'll be an amazing daddy." She scratched the patch of fur between her ears. "He's probably worried if you'll like him, too."

Before she could say more, the dog rose to all fours and stared at the door behind her. Lindsey turned in time to see it open. Scuffed dark brown boots stepped in. She took in the frayed edges of the person's jeans as her gaze inched higher. Thick muscular thighs hugged in denim towered over her. Soon she found herself staring at another part of him hugged by the denim.

"You've got to be kidding me." The deep, familiar baritones of the man's voice echoed in the room.

She sucked in a breath and forced herself to lean back and stare into the irritated hazel eyes of her jerk of a neighbor.

Her mouth dropped. Of all the veterans in the country to walk in that door, of course it had to be this one.

Mr. Monroe closed his eyes and mumbled something to himself as he took some deep breaths of his own. She watched in complete fascination at the way his grey cotton tee stretched against his muscled chest when he inhaled a slow, deep lungful of air.

For some reason, she couldn't think straight when he was around. Her brain went from screaming for her to run the hell away to wondering what he would look and feel like...naked...on top of her. She forced herself to stare at the floor as she tried to collect her thoughts.

Java nudged her cold nose against her chin and licked her cheek. She smiled and gave the dog a hug. She was right. She was tougher than this.

She climbed to her feet, kept a firm grip on the lab with her right palm, and stretched out her left arm. "Mr. Monroe, I don't think we've been properly introduced. I'm Lindsey Marshall."

The look of irritation on his face changed to one of anger as he waved his artificial left hand at her.

She cringed and dropped her arm to her side as she cursed under her breath. "Yeah, sorry I forgot you don't have a ..."

He tipped his chin at Java and cut her off. "Is that my dog?"

She nodded and pet the chocolate lab, who was currently pressing her head against Lindsey's leg. "Yes, this lovely young lady is Java." She rolled her shoulders back and flashed her most professional smile. "And I will be your trainer for the next few weeks."

The corners of Asshole Monroe's lips curved up. "Trainer? How about you work on training your own dog first?"

## Episode Five

By Anne Lange

Just his fucking luck. Could his day get any worse? Not only did her freakin' dog keep horning in on his sleepless nights. Not only did he have to see her rescue said pooch in a cute, short shirt and not much else. Not only did he have to torture himself with fantasies of gripping that mass of glorious red hair in his remaining fist while he drove into her tight heat from behind. Not only did he have to salivate, wondering what her pert nipples tasted like. Now he'd have to spend the next few weeks horny as fucking hell while Ms. Marshall taught him how to work with his dog?

How the hell did she expect him to concentrate?

He dropped his gaze to the dog. A dog who, oh look, no big surprise, sat huddled next to his pretty neighbor's thigh. Yup, another female to reject him. Great. Just fucking great. Jess rubbed his forehead, feeling another headache coming on. And his damn arm ached like a bitch.

"Shelby isn't being trained as a therapy dog, Mr. Monroe."

"Damn good thing, because she clearly doesn't come when she's called." The ball of fur didn't skedaddle when ordered to either.

"Java, however, has been fully trained, Mr. Monroe. We—"

"Jess."

"Excuse me?"

"My name is Jess. My father is Mr. Monroe and he's ...." Why the hell did he tell her that? He didn't want to be on a first name basis with her.

"I'm sorry." Delicate eyebrows dipped in a frown, and she pulled her bottom lip between her teeth.

He was such an ass. Jess took a deep breath and forced himself to calm down. He softened his tone. "Never mind." He shuffled his feet and shoved his one hand into the front pocket of his jeans. His prosthetic hung at his other side like a flashing beacon to the two females sitting in front of him. The dog pitied him. He could see it in those soulful eyes of her. She blinked. Her ears were tucked close to her head. Her nose twitched as she studied him. "Look, maybe there's somebody else who can help me with Java."

Between the lack of sleep, panic attacks, and the headaches, he needed something to change. And he'd been hoping this dog would be the answer.

Lindsey rubbed the soft spot on the top of the Java's head between her ears. The dog glanced up. Was that a plea in her expression? A plea for another wounded soldier to help instead of the broken one in front of her? Maybe one that at least had all his parts.

“Can we please start over?” Jess raised his head and captured Lindsey’s solemn gaze. “I am sorry,” she added. “About everything you’ve been through. I’m not...appalled by your injury, Jess. I’m curious about it, though.” She patted the dog absently.

Jess tore his eyes away from her. Those lips of hers were very distracting. But she wasn’t here to be his fantasy fuck buddy. She was here to work with him and his newly assigned dog.

Maybe if he kissed her and got it out of the way, they could move on. He could stop wondering, be able to focus more. Might take the edge off. God knows doing the one-handed dance to visions of her sugar plums wasn’t doing it for him.

Jess snapped his eyes closed. His mother would smack him upside the head. Since when did he objectify women like that? And when the hell did his pity party start rolling like a runaway train?

Oh yeah, when he lost his arm and got shipped home. What he needed was a big fucking rewind button. Chuck would still be alive. He’d have his arm. And he wouldn’t be thinking or saying the crap that he was thinking and saying. Though he wouldn’t be living next to the beautiful Ms. Lindsey Marshall either.

He tested out his smile. “Hey, you wouldn’t be interested in giving a guy a kiss, would you? You know, as a way to start over?”

Episode Six  
By Aubrey Wynne

Java stood, tail wagging, and sniffed at the artificial hand. Her pink tongue licked a finger and then another. An unexpected smile curled his lips. *At least one female is good with it.*

"She understands verbal commands as well," Lindsey said with more than a hint of laughter. This time, she held out her right hand.

Jess unclenched his fist from inside his pocket and felt her warm fingers slide over his. For a brief moment, he allowed himself to remain lost in those clear green eyes. When his jeans tightened, he gave a fake cough and ended the contact.

"So what's on the agenda today? How to take her for a walk?"

"We'll get to that. Today you both need to get acquainted and make sure you are compatible," Lindsey said in a professional tone. "Have you owned a dog before?"

"Sure, as a kid. And our unit had a shepherd that sniffed out bombs." *Dammit.*

"I only ask to make sure you have no fear of canines. Some people think they want a dog but are intimidated by the size, exuberance, or just the barking." She studied him for a moment. "I don't think that will be an issue."

"Why?"

"I get the feeling there isn't much that frightens you."

No smile, no hint of teasing. She was serious. *I'll remember to keep the windows closed so she doesn't hear me at night.* "Nope. I've survived hell, and I'm here to tell it about it." He absently rubbed his aching arm.

A flash of jade eyes took in the action, and a sadness shadowed her face. Not pity – he knew the difference by now. "I'd like to hear your story."

She gently squeezed his forearm and the ache moved to his chest. He wondered again if he might find comfort in the warmth of her skin next to his, her body filling the cold emptiness that had settled in his heart since that day...

The next few hours flew by as he learned the skills of his new canine companion. He had even managed a few grins and a genuine laugh. An apology might be a good way to end the session.

"Thanks for all your help. I can be a real ass sometimes, and I appreciate you not holding it against me." His mother would be proud of him but he could almost hear Chuck hooting with disbelief.

"Well, I know Shelby can be a bit obnoxious but she's a work in progress. I've only had her a couple of months." She bit her plump bottom lip then looked up at him under thick, dark lashes. "Since I'm your neighbor, we could probably arrange to bring Java home sooner and do more of the training at your house. Would you like that?"

Would he like that? No. Yes. Fuck! "Sure, if it isn't too much trouble. I guess that would work."

"We can introduce Shelby and set up some play dates."

"Play dates?" *Could you wipe the stupid grin off your face? She'll think you're a pervert.*

"For the dogs," Lindsey answered. "Or whatever."

Those kissable lips turned up at the corners as she turned and bent over Java to attach her leash. He stuck his hand in his pocket to keep from giving her firm, round ass a light smack. Flirting had once been second nature to him but he hadn't felt the urge in years. She'd also made him forget about his arm for a few hours. It might be an interesting summer after all.

Episode 7  
Caroline Lee

The last three weeks had been giddy. There'd been her usual classes at the gym, and finishing up this second-to-the-last semester of veterinary school, sure. That was nothing new. But in between, in those glorious few free hours each week, she got to see...*him*.

Jess's relationship with Java had progressed so well that the chocolate lab was living with him full-time, now. Which meant that she did her training visits right next door, *in his house*. Every time she went over, she was nervous and excited, and made a complete fool of herself. There was the time that she tripped on his doorstep and would've busted her head open if he hadn't caught her. Then the time that she tried to hand him a leash when he was already holding the food bowl, completely forgetting that he only had the one arm. And of course, all of the time she spent admiring the really cool stuff his prosthesis could do, no matter how many times his dark brows drew in disappointedly when he caught her staring.

She should be too embarrassed to show her face over there again. She should find it too awkward to peek through her living room curtains at him, when he walked Java in the evenings. She should definitely *not* be fantasizing about him, wondering what it'd feel like to have his chest pressed against hers and taste those hard lips and –

Lindsey bit her lip, stirring the spaghetti sauce. *There is absolutely no need to be thinking those thoughts, young lady*. Her mother's voice, and her father's teasing, sounded loud in her brain. She'd heard them both often enough, the good Lord knew, in between her sisters' joking about her distraction at their weekly family dinner.

But she couldn't help it; she *was* distracted, and totally obsessed with her hot neighbor. The problem was, that Jess and Java worked so well together, there wasn't much left for her to do. So she'd decided to swallow down her embarrassment and take a step. Instead of working at his house this evening, she'd invited them both over here, to her house. She'd claimed that Java needed a chance to socialize with Shelby, but she was hoping that he'd stay for the spaghetti dinner she'd cooked up too. And the wine. And the brownies. And maybe some more wine and Netflix, after?

*Whoops*, the sauce was dripping on the counter. Laughing at herself, Lindsey set the spoon back down and wiped up the mess, hurrying through the last few steps of prep before the 6:30 pm start time.

By 6:33, he still wasn't there, and Lindsey was halfway through her first consolation glass of wine, sure that he wasn't arriving. By 6:35, she considered throwing out all of the spaghetti and eating the pan of brownies in front of *Gilmore Girls* episodes.

So when the doorbell rang at 6:37, she darn near tripped over her freshly painted red toenails to get to it. Setting down the wine, she called to Shelby, clipped the leash onto her collar, and took a few steadying breaths. This was it. He was here. Did she look okay? Suitably casual and *oh-I-just-threw-this-on*

but also really sexy? Lindsey squeezed her eyes shut, said a silent prayer that she wasn't going to do or say anything stupider than usual, and threw the door open.

In the fading light, he looked just as scrumptious as he had for the last weeks. Except this time, there was a little smile under his stubble, and his lovely eyes weren't as hooded as they'd been during that first official meeting. "Hi."

Java's leash was clenched in his fake hand – is that what she was supposed to call it? A fake hand? She had no idea, but it was one of a million questions she wanted to ask – so he was able to give her a little wave with his right fingers. "Hi."

A good start. Unfortunately at that moment, Java smelled Shelby, gave a little *wuff* of excitement, and barreled through the door, pulling Jess past Lindsey. Shelby, however, was just as clumsy as her momma, because the mutt darted *for* the door, and Java followed, and in less than a heartbeat both humans were wrapped around and pulled together by the dog leashes.

It was a stunning feeling, to have his chest pressed against hers like this, and Lindsey resisted the urge to take a really deep breath. His prosthetic arm was trapped between their stomachs, and hers was around her back where she was still holding Shelby's leash, but at that moment, it didn't matter.

He smelled like a man should. He looked like a man should, all cut angles and harsh lines and firm muscles. He *felt* like a man should, and despite the supreme awkwardness of being wrapped up by two dogs, Lindsey wouldn't have missed this for the world.

But a full minute of silence demanded her attention. "Sorry." She tried for a flippant smile, but was afraid she looked love-sick instead. "I can be kinda a dork sometimes."

*A dork?* She managed not to groan. *Well, if you weren't before, you are now, dork.* He wasn't the kind to make jokes. He wasn't the kind to grin at her silliness. He wasn't the kind –

She sucked in a breath – she could actually *taste* him, they were so close – when his fingers brushed against her cheek. And then he smiled. Really smiled, like he had when he'd met Java. "Well, I think you're pretty adorkable."

He'd made a joke? Or was he teasing her? Or did he – wait. He thought she was adorable? And then she stopped thinking altogether, because Jess was leaning closer.

Episode 8  
Kris Calvert

Adorkable? Jess had no idea what was wrong with him. He wasn't the kind of guy who tried to impress women with cute pick up lines. Frankly, before he'd lost his hand and his confidence, there'd never been a need for them. He'd always beamed with confidence – the kind of light emitted by men who weren't afraid of anything on the outside, including a beautiful woman. But since he'd been home, his confidence had been replaced with anger and a cockiness that only reared its ugly head when he felt pitied. But Lindsey had shown him she didn't pity him. She treated him like the man he wanted to be again, and he found himself in new and dangerous territory – spending time with a woman who made him feel whole. A woman who could destroy him all over again if he allowed her into his new and closely guarded life and heart.

“Did you just call me *adorkable*?”

“What? No.” Jess fumbled the words, stepping out of the tangled web of dog leashes and away from the scene. He needed to catch his breath. A breath that wasn't filled with the vanilla scent wafting from her red locks.

Lindsey dropped her chin, hiding the blush on her cheeks. “Oh. Sorry.”

“You're the dog trainer. Can't you do something about these two?” Jess did his best not to look Lindsey in the face. If he caught her glance just once, he didn't know if he could stay away from her.

The weeks of pretending he didn't care for the beautiful redhead, beyond Java's training, were wearing thin on his stubborn constitution. More importantly, she was the first woman he'd even thought of in a sexual way since coming home. Countless nights he'd pulled a self-imposed sentry duty, watching through the blinds for a glimpse of Lindsey in her Princess Leia shirt before getting pissed at himself for lurking. He was better than that, and he knew it. Still, he couldn't help himself. He was drawn to her like a fly to sweet honey.

“Java is in *your* charge, Jess. Why don't *you* control her?”

All Jess could think was, I can barely control myself around you. How can I be expected to control the damn dog?

Lindsey went to the floor, solving the leash puzzle that quickly unraveled in her hands, as Java left Shelby yapping in Lindsey's arms only to sit at Jess' feet without command.

“Maybe this wasn't such a good idea.” Jess said, the words giving his now obedient mutt's ears a loving twist. “I'm not ready for...”

Lindsey walked the four steps it took to meet Jess head on and stared at him without pretense.

“*You're* not ready? Or the dog's not ready?”

Jess pulled the vanilla-filled air into his lungs, exhaling in a slow, deliberate breath. He was trying to calm his nerves, but mostly he was weighing his options. "Look, I've done my best from the moment I met you not to..."

Lindsey moved a step closer. "Not to what?"

Jess hung his hand on his hip, shifting his weight in his well fitting jeans, and looked around the room like a man who'd accidentally stumbled into the feminine hygiene aisle at the grocery store. He was lost, filled with panic, and looking for a way out.

"Why can't you just acknowledge what we've both known since the night I stepped foot on your front porch in nothing but a Star Wars t-shirt?"

Jess' eyes uncontrollably darted back to Lindsey.

"What? You think just because I was embarrassed when I noticed your arm that I didn't see you looking? It's true. I was checking you out. But you were checking me out too and have been every day since that night. At least I have the balls to admit it. Listen Jess, you want to act like there's something wrong with you, but the only thing wrong with you is that you *think* there's something wrong with you." Lindsey's voice reached a high pitch as she rammed her point home. "And there isn't. You might think you're not a whole person – a whole man, but I've seen your arm. It doesn't scare me, Jess. It doesn't," she repeated. "Because even though you left part of your body on the battlefield, your soul is intact. And that's the most beautiful part about you."

Jess took a deep breath. "So, you *weren't* wearing panties that night?"

"Out of *all* of that," she said, waving her arm in a complete circle, "the only thing you heard was *no panties?*"

"I'm a man who hasn't been with a woman in a really long time. I couldn't help but hear *no panties*. So...really? No panties?"

Lindsey dropped her shoulders and took another step forward. "I never wear panties," she whispered.

"Fuck it," Jess muttered. "I can't do this."

Taking the nape of her long neck into his strong hand, Jess pulled Lindsey into his body, pressing his forehead into hers. Swallowing hard, he stroked the back of her head, gripping her long red hair in his capable fist. Resisting his urge to back her into the couch and kiss her – among other things – into tomorrow, he held his ground and made his confession. "I'm not very good at this...anymore."

Lindsey blinked deliberately and without another thought, dropped her arm to her side, grasping his new hand in hers.

"Don't." It was all Jess could think to say. No one outside of his physical therapist had ever touched his prosthetic hand.

Bringing it to rest on the waistband of her tight jeans, she left him there, placing both of her hands on his rugged face. "Don't say *don't* to me." She whispered the words and shook her head.

"Fine," Jess replied, feeling his newfound confidence and neglected manhood growing by leaps and bounds. "How do you feel about, *yes*?"

"Depends on the question."

Running his tongue across his dry lips, Jess closed his eyes and made the first real decision with consequences since coming off the battlefield.

"May I kiss you? I need to ask because once I start, I'm not stopping."

"I thought you'd never ask."

"Is that a yes?"

"Yes."