

DEBBIE
MACOMBER

Navy
Brides

Navy Wife and Navy Blues



One

After walking over to the window in her brother's empty apartment, Lindy Kyle paused and let her tired gaze rest on the view of downtown Seattle. Dusk was settling over the steel jungle, and giant shadows from the skyscrapers fell into the maze of concrete across the picturesque waterfront. In another mood Lindy would have been struck by the intricate beauty of what lay before her, but not now.

Seattle, as Steve had claimed, really was a lovely city. When she'd arrived, she'd been so preoccupied with trying to find the address of the apartment and the appropriate parking space for her Volkswagen Rabbit in the lot behind the building that she hadn't taken the time to notice anything around her.

Now she sighed at the panorama that lay before her. "I'm actually here," she said, mainly to hear herself speak. She'd come to expect a lot from one western city. She felt as an immigrant might have years ago, sailing into New York Harbor, seeking a new way of life and freedom from the shackles of the past. Lindy had been bound, too, in the chains of grief and unhappiness.

Dramatically she posed, pretending to be the Statue of Liberty, her right hand held high as if gripping a lighted torch, her left firmly clasping imaginary stone tablets. “Okay, Seattle, give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free.” Lindy sucked in a shaky breath and battled back tears. “Seattle, calm my fears. Clear my head.” She dropped her arms and swallowed at the growing knot in her throat. “Heal my heart,” she added in a broken whisper. “Please, heal my heart...”

Exhaling raggedly, she dropped her arm and admitted it was too much to expect—even from a place that had once been honored as the most livable city in the United States. Far too much to ask.

Suddenly exhausted, Lindy picked up her suitcase and headed down the narrow hallway toward the two bedrooms. She opened the first door and stood in the doorway examining the room. The closet, which was partly open, displayed an organized row of civilian clothes hanging inside, crisp and neat. A framed picture or two rested on the dresser, but Lindy didn’t pay attention to those. This had to be the bedroom of Rush Callaghan, her brother’s roommate. Currently both men were at sea serving six-month tours of duty. Steve was an officer aboard the submarine *Atlantis*, somewhere in the Pacific upholding God, country and the American flag. Lindy had no idea where Rush was and didn’t particularly care. Men weren’t exactly her favorite subject at the moment.

She closed the bedroom door and moved on to the next room. A dresser drawer hung open, mismatched socks draped over its edge. Bulky-knit sweaters were carelessly tossed on the ledge above the closet and shoes were heaped in a pile on the floor.

“Home, sweet home,” Lindy said with a soft smile.

She really was fond of her brother, and although he was nearly ten years older, her childhood had been marked with memories of his wit and warmth. She laid her suitcase across the unmade bed, opened it and reached for Steve's letter. "Come to Seattle," he'd written in his lazy, uneven scrawl. "Forget the past and make a new life for yourself." Steve had had firsthand experience with pain, Lindy knew, and she respected his judgment. He'd survived the emotional trauma of divorce and seemed to have come out of it with a new maturity.

"You'll know which bedroom is mine," Steve's letter continued. "I can't remember the last time I changed the sheets so you might want to do that before you crash."

Crashing certainly sounded inviting, Lindy mused, sinking with a sigh onto the edge of the unmade bed.

Although she'd nearly memorized Steve's words, Lindy read completely through the letter once more. Clean sheets were in the hall closet, he explained, and she decided to tackle making the bed as soon as she'd unpacked her things. The washer and dryer were in a small laundry room off the kitchen, the letter went on to say.

When she finished reading, Lindy placed Steve's instructions on top of the dresser. She stripped off the sheets, carried the bedding into the laundry room and started the washing machine.

When the phone rang it caught her off guard, and she widened her eyes and placed her hand over her heart as shock waves washed over her.

It rang one more time before she decided to answer it.

"Hello?"

"Lindy, it's your mother."

"Oh, hi, Mom." Lindy smiled at her parents' habit of

identifying themselves. She'd been able to recognize her own family's voices since she was a child.

"I take it you've arrived safely. Honey, you should have phoned—your father and I've been worried."

Lindy sighed. "Mom, I just walked in the door not more than ten minutes ago. I was planning to phone after I fixed myself something to eat."

"Did your car give you any problems?"

"None."

"Good." Her mother sounded relieved.

"Everything's fine—just the way I said it would be," Lindy added.

"What about money?"

"Mom, I'm doing great." A slight exaggeration, but Lindy wasn't desperate—at least she wouldn't be if she found a job reasonably soon. The unemployment problem was one she hoped to correct first thing in the morning.

"I talked to your Uncle Henry in Kansas City and he said you should think about applying at Boeing...that airplane company. He claims they're always looking for someone with a degree in computer science."

"I'll do that right away," Lindy answered in an effort to appease her mother.

"You'll let us know when you've found something?"

"Yes, Mom. I promise."

"And don't be shy about asking for money. Your father and I—"

"Mom, please don't worry about me. I'm going to be just great."

Her mother expelled her breath in a long, anxious sigh. "I do worry about you, sweetie. You've been so terribly unhappy. I can't tell you how disappointed your father and I are in that young man of yours."

“Paul isn’t mine anymore.” Lindy’s voice trembled a little, but she needed to say it out loud every now and then just to remind herself of the fact. For four years she’d linked all thoughts of her future with Paul; being without him felt as though a large part of herself was missing.

“I saw his mother the other day, and I’ll have you know I took a great deal of pleasure in looking the other way,” Grace Kyle continued, with more than a hint of righteous indignation.

“What happened between Paul and me isn’t Mrs. Abram’s fault.”

“No. But she obviously didn’t raise her son right—not if he could do something this underhanded and despicable to you.”

“Mom, do you mind if we don’t talk about Paul anymore? Ever?” Even the mention of his name brought with it a sharp pain, yet part of her was still hungering for news of him. Someday, Lindy vowed, she’d look back on these awful months and smile at the memory. Someday, maybe. But not now.

“Lindy, of course I won’t talk about Paul if you don’t want me to. I was being insensitive—forgive me, sweetie.”

“It’s all right, Mom.”

A short, throbbing silence followed. “You’ll keep in touch, won’t you?”

“Yes,” Lindy answered and nodded. “I promise.”

After a few more minutes of filling her parents in on the news of her trip, Lindy replaced the receiver. The washing machine went into the spin cycle behind her, and she tossed a glance over her shoulder. That was the way her world felt lately, as if she were being put through a churn-

ing wash. The only question that remained to be answered was if she'd come out of this drip-dry and wrinkle free.

Rush Callaghan stood on the bridge of the USS *Mitchell*, a pair of binoculars gripped tightly in his hands. He paused to suck in a deep breath of tangy salt air and sighed his appreciation for the clear, clean scent of it. Being on the open seas stirred his blood back to life after three long months of shore duty. He relaxed, home at last, as the huge 1,092-foot-long aircraft carrier cut a wide path out of Puget Sound and into the dark green waters of the north Pacific. Rush was more than glad. He had recognized from the time he was a boy that his destiny lay on the swirling waters of the world's oceans. He'd been born on the sea and he'd known ever since that this was where he belonged, where he felt truly alive.

Rush had dedicated his life to the sea, and in turn she had become his mistress. She was often demanding and unreasonable, but Rush wouldn't have had it any other way. A gentle breeze carried with it a cool, soothing mist. The spray came at him like the gentle, caressing fingers of a woman riffling through his hair and pressing her body against his own. Rush grinned at the picturesque image, knowing his lover well. She was gently welcoming him back into her arms, but Rush wasn't easily fooled. His mistress was fickle. Another time, possibly soon, she would lash out at him and harshly slap his face with cold, biting wind and rain. Her icy fingers would sting him with outrage. It was little wonder, Rush thought, that he'd come to think of the sea as his lover, since she often played the role.

When the *Mitchell* had pulled out of the Bremerton shipyard eighteen hours earlier, Rush had left nothing

to tie him to the shore. No wife, no sweetheart, nothing except a Seattle apartment where he stored his worldly goods. He wasn't looking to build any bridges that would link him to the mainland. He'd learned early in his career that a wife and family weren't meant for him. If the waters of the world were his mistress, then the navy would be his wife. There'd been a time when he'd hoped to divide his life, but no more.

A quick exchange of angry words followed by an outburst of disgust from his fellow officer, Jeff Dwyer, caught Rush's attention and he lowered his binoculars.

"Problems?" he asked when Jeff joined him on the bridge.

Jeff's mouth tightened and he nodded. "The captain's just ordered us back."

"What the hell?" Rush felt a hot surge of anger pulse through him. "Why?"

"There's something wrong with the catapults. Apparently maintenance doesn't have the necessary parts to repair the problem."

Rush swore under his breath. The catapults were used to launch the Hawkeyes, Intruders, Tomcats and other aircraft from the carrier runway. They were vital equipment for any assignment at sea.

Fortunately the squadrons flying in from two navy airfields on the West Coast—a hundred planes were scheduled to rendezvous with the *Mitchell*—had yet to arrive. As chief navigator it was Rush's job to guide the carrier through the waters; now it was up to him to head the *Mitchell* back to the shipyard.

"I've already sent out word to the airfields," Jeff informed him. "They've turned the planes back."

Frustration built up in Rush like a tidal wave. After

three months shore duty and a mere eighteen hours at sea they had to bring the *Mitchell* home to port with her tail between her legs.

“How long?” Rush asked between clenched teeth.

“Maintenance doesn’t have a figure yet, but if it’s as bad as it looks, we could be sitting on our butts for at least a week.”

Rush spat a four-letter word.

“My sentiments exactly,” Jeff answered.

Rush let himself into the dark apartment and set his seabag just inside the door. The way things were working out he could be here awhile. The realization angered him every time he thought about it. He moved into the kitchen and set the six-pack of cold beer on the counter. He rarely indulged himself this way, but tonight he was in the mood to get good and drunk.

Not bothering to turn on any of the lights, Rush took one chilled aluminum can and carried it with him into the living room, pulling off the tab as he went. Standing in front of the wide picture window, he offered a silent toast to the glittering lights of the waterfront several blocks below. He took a large swig of beer. Tonight something cold and alcoholic suited his temperament.

He took another long drink, sat on the sofa and propped his feet on the coffee table. What he needed was a woman. One sexy as hell, with big breasts and wide hips to bury himself in—one who would relieve his angry frustration. Rush frowned. The crude thought wasn’t like him. He rarely allowed his mind to indulge in such primitive fantasies. But tonight, after watching weeks of planning and months of hard work go down the drain, Rush wasn’t in the mood for niceties.

Against his will, Rush remembered the look in his friend Jeff's eyes when he'd stepped off the gangplank. Jeff had been hurrying to get home to his wife, Susan. Rush didn't need much of an imagination to know what Jeff was doing about now—and it wasn't drinking cold beer in a dark living room. He allowed himself to grin. Jeff and Susan. Now that was one marriage Rush wouldn't have bet good money on. But Susan Dwyer had pleasantly surprised him. When Jeff had left Bremerton earlier in the week, there'd been no tears in her eyes, only smiles. She'd been a good wife to Jeff from the first. Susan wasn't a clinger or a complainer; the only bonds she'd wrapped around her husband had been in his heart.

Rush had seen subtle changes in his friend since his marriage. He'd been looking for major ones. Over the years Rush had witnessed the power a woman could wield over a sailor's life often enough to recognize the symptoms. But Susan Dwyer hadn't been like some of the others, and Rush had silently admired her—and envied Jeff. His friend had gotten damn lucky to find a woman like Susan. Luckier than Rush... But then Rush had given up trying.

The sound of someone moving behind him jerked Rush into action and he vaulted off the sofa. The bathroom door closed and he heard the rush of running water. What the hell! Someone was in the apartment. It had to be Steve. He moved down the hallway, looked inside his roommate's bedroom and cocked his eyebrows in astonishment. A silk robe was draped across the end of the bed and the room was littered with female paraphernalia.

Rush released a slow, exasperated breath. He'd been afraid something like this might happen. Steve was still working his way through the pain of his divorce and it

had left him vulnerable. Rush was all too familiar with the seductive wiles a woman could use to cloud a man's better judgment. And now it appeared that some schemer was taking advantage of his friend's generous nature, planting herself in their apartment. Apparently Steve was still susceptible to being tricked and used. Well, Rush wouldn't stand for it. A surge of anger at the thought of someone taking advantage of his friend's kind heart made him clench his fists.

He'd gladly handle this situation, he decided. He'd get rid of her, and if Steve asked for an explanation later, Rush had the perfect excuse. After all they had an agreement about this place and it didn't include inviting women to move in. His mouth tightened into a narrow line. From what little he could see, this one had made herself right at home. Well, no more.

With beer in hand, he leaned against the wall, crossed his legs and waited. Within a couple of minutes the bathroom door opened and the woman stepped out. Her dark eyes rounded before she let out a soft gasp.

Obviously startled half out of her wits, the woman's hand flew to her heart, gripping the lacy edge of her pajamas. "Who are you?"

Dear God, wouldn't you know it, Rush groaned inwardly. This wasn't just any woman, but one as sexy as the one he'd been fantasizing about, with nice, round breasts and long, inviting legs. One look and Rush could understand why his friend had set her up in this cozy arrangement. Lord knew she was tempting enough. Her sheer baby-doll pajamas revealed peekaboo nipples, firm hips and shapely legs. It took him a full second to realize her hair was dark and nothing like that of the blondes that usually appealed to his friend.