

Crazy In Love
By
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Kindle Worlds Omega Team

Chapter One

Joy liked sunset in New York. It arrived slower than at her home in Tampa, or in most of the military hotspots of the world where she'd spent the greater part of her adult life. New York had a gentle sunset, sometimes beautiful, as it was tonight. And there were few places better than Central Park to see it. Or, more precisely, the Upper West Side.

She stood facing the lush, green area with her back to the award-winning, world famous art gallery and considered not going in. She could take a walk, and then attend her appointment tomorrow, the reason she was in New York this fall. Then she'd go back to Florida.

In the act of stepping off the sidewalk and crossing the road to the park, she paused. Her future boss, Grey Holden, had told her she'd like this exhibit. He'd given her this invitation to a private showing of an artist he knew. "To cheer you up before your assessment," he'd said when she called to thank him. "Don't worry. You'll sail through. Enjoy yourself time while you're there and come back ready to go."

Maybe she'd go in for an hour. At the very least she'd get a glass of indifferent wine, and when she returned, the light would have changed and she'd get to see the park at night. Maybe she'd grab dinner somewhere nice, instead of the fast food she'd planned to get on the way back to her hotel.

Maybe she'd meet somebody she could spend a few hours with. She smiled at her own whimsy. She'd had lovers, but nobody special. Her job hadn't allowed it, and her independent spirit rebelled against it. Why would she settle down, as her mother put it, when she had the rest of the world to explore, and work to do? If she wanted kids, she'd have them. She didn't need a man for that, either. It was just her mother, but Joy couldn't blame her. Her Polish upbringing, where family was all, and the sad history of her ancestors pointed to family being the bedrock of a life. For Joy that had been her army buddies, not her unknown Ziolkowski forbears.

Making a swift decision, she turned and climbed the three shallow steps that led to the front door.

She handed her ticket to the man at the door and received a catalog in exchange. She flipped through it, and noted the artist was a native Floridian who'd served in the military. Smiling to herself, she moved on. She saw a pattern here. Florida, military, oh yeah. Grey Holden and his partner had sure started something with the Omega Team. And she was about to join them. Maybe. If she could hold her shit together long enough to pass this assessment. It was her last step before she became a member of Omega, and found another family.

The narrow hallway opened into a huge interior space. A spiraling walkway wound up to the top, and smaller galleries led off the main path. Large canvases dominated the walls, and more intimate sculptures were set on the other side and around the main area on the first floor.

The colors were certainly from Florida. The bright, glaring yellow of the sun and the stark blue of the sky shone from most of the paintings by the entrance. Intrigued despite her determination to take a quick look and leave, Joy ventured farther inside. At first she enjoyed the paintings. She'd have one in her apartment in a heartbeat. Once she got an apartment, that was. Right now she had a room, something the renter had grandly called a studio. She'd had bigger barracks accommodation. It stored her stuff and held a bed, which was all she needed right now.

Joy ascended the walkway, and studied the art. The colors deepened as they would from dawn to midday, but after noon, it wasn't just the shades darkening. The black increased, and the orange turned scarlet, then mingled with the darkness.

The paintings took Joy back to the battlefield. Tension pushed at her shields, the protection she'd carefully built for herself since she'd come home. Inside her, a bird flapped against the cage, desperate to be set free. But if she did that, all hell could break loose. These paintings weren't helping. Did Grey know they would have that effect on her?

Of course he did, the bastard. This wasn't a relaxing evening. He knew the artist, so he'd known what she would see, and what the sight would do to her. She'd gone through a year of intensive psychiatric treatment. She was off the meds, slept through most nights. Her terrors had decreased, and because they'd started the treatment early, she'd made a speedy recovery. Grey wanted to know how much she could take, not just physically, but mentally.

Grey was a compassionate man, but a person had to break through his wall of tough, hard warrior to find the inner core. Few people ever did that. She couldn't say she knew him well. Serving in the same army didn't guarantee a thing. Not a fucking thing.

She should have gone somewhere else, taken that walk in the park.

Grimly, she continued to plod up the slope. She would show Grey who was tough enough. She'd send him a postcard when she'd done. For relief, she ventured into the side rooms. These contained a selection of paintings and sculptures related to the mood reflected on the big canvases outside. They were for sale, little red stickers dotting the walls next to the pieces. Most of the first floor ones were sold, but as she ascended, fewer red dots appeared.

"Grim, aren't they?"

The male voice was so low Joy didn't think she'd heard properly. Maybe it was something from her own mind, because the sentiment echoed exactly what she was thinking. "Pretty much," she said, equally softly, keeping her distance.

"I like them."

She flicked a glance at the man who'd come to stand by her side. They stared at a canvas where black had spread over the painting, thickly plastered atop the blue and gold beneath. She found herself searching for the sparks of color.

While he stared at the painting, she stared at him. He must be six foot four, and from what she could see beneath the black pullover and pants he wore, not a scrap of that big body was fat. His profile held the promise of violence. His strong forehead and thick black brows framed a nose that must have been broken more than once judging by its shape. His dark brown hair held a strand or two of gray. He wore it longer than she was used to, and it curled. He hadn't tried to control the mass. Either that, or he'd had a very expensive haircut. She didn't know enough about fashion to tell the difference.

And he oozed sex appeal. Joy had spent time around some of the biggest, baddest men her country had produced, and she'd never felt such a strong pull to any of them. This one, though, with one low-voiced comment and a concentrated stare, not at her, had taken her breath away. "It's like a nightmare is taking over a sunny day."

"Or reality. The darkest night has some glimmer of light."

Finally, he turned his head to meet her eyes.

She felt like she'd been waiting a lifetime for him to look at her. She froze. She was always ready for action, never panicked, and yet Joy Ziolkowski lost it.

Before that moment she'd have said she was ready for anything. Not this guy. His eyes, as blue as the sky in the paintings downstairs pinned her to the floor, and his face, full-on, with all his attention fixed on her, seared through her.

Her mind, already prepared for analysis, picked out the careful haircut and the well-cut casual clothes as the sign of a metro-man. Even that didn't deter her. This man had a hard core, as rigid as hers. She wouldn't like to come up against him in a fight. But she'd like to come up against him in the bedroom.

For a few seconds she lost her social veneer, but then she swallowed and lifted her chin. What the fuck had they been talking about?

Pictures, yes, that was it.

Turning her attention back to the painting proved harder than she'd imagined. Staring at the thick layer of black paint, all she could think of was him. She didn't have to look back to know he was still gazing at her. "Let's move on."

She could have bitten her tongue out. *Let's?* What had happened to her? She'd always been okay in the urban jungle, better than okay, but with one look this stranger had smashed her defenses.

The next painting progressed the ideas in the other one, as she'd expected it would. She didn't have anything to say about it, but when he said, "Same old, same old," they shared a grin.

His smile turned his face from grim determination to unalloyed delight. Stunned, she stared at him until she recalled herself and turned away.

She might enjoy the exhibit more with a companion who seemed to share her opinion of it. She could shake him off later, if he decided to cling. Men had tried to pick her up in the most unexpected places. It wasn't due to her dazzling beauty or her vivacious personality, neither of which she possessed. She was female, and sometimes that was all they needed.

This guy was in for a shock if he moved in on her. She had skills not hinted at by her appearance. She appeared deliberately nondescript in the city, but she'd been trained by the best. Right now her physical condition was at peak. She didn't have a license to carry in New York, but she didn't need a gun to do damage. She could take somebody on with what weapons came to her hand. Glancing around, she noted the sharp edges of the sculptures on display. They'd do fine.

She doubted that would happen, but she couldn't help her instincts. In fact, she usually had to force them into the background when she was trying to live normally. Like now.

When she left the small gallery, her nemesis came with her. "The name's Rick," he said as they took a few steps up the walkway to the next exhibit. "Just in case you'd like to talk to me again."

He kept his distance, she'd give him that. "Joy," she said briefly. That gave him nothing, not even her real name, only the one everybody called her.

"I can see why," he said, smiling at her.

That smile should be banned. It lit his whole face and did amazing things to his blue eyes. He concentrated on her, bathing her with approval and pleasure. She returned his smile, but slightly, enough to be polite, not enough for him to take anything from it.

They were half way up the long, winding road to what Joy feared would become Armageddon in the artist's eyes. People were murmuring, discussing the paintings, but Joy was finding the progress dispiriting. "I'm getting tired of this. The doom and gloom. I've seen too much of it to want more."

"Maybe the artist will surprise us," he answered, and guided her past the next small gallery. They continued up the main slope. The sculptures became more pointed and shinier. Where

they'd been decorated with unidentifiable crud, like something washed up on the shore downstairs, as the paintings became thicker and more clogged, the sculptures became cleaner. They gleamed with polishing.

"Weapons," she said, once she understood. "The only things that flourish in war."

"Oh, I think hatred and prejudice play a part too," he commented, his voice calm. "But some wars are necessary, don't you agree?"

She turned a shoulder in a shrug. "Maybe." She didn't want to betray her background. She didn't want him to know anything about her that he could look up later. "Do you know much about war?"

He mirrored her gesture. "Some." He turned to another painting. "I like the shapes in this one. But I can't help thinking that if you had something like this in your apartment you'd injure yourself if you fell against it."

"I wonder if Van Gogh thought that." Van Gogh being another painter who used thick layers of paint. "But it makes conservation difficult. Preserving all those sharp peaks must be tricky."

They continued up. Joy considered making her excuses and leaving. She so wasn't enjoying this. What had gotten into Grey, sending her to this? He knew how she was affected. Her mouth tightened. On the other hand, it was just like him. He wanted to be sure she could cope, something he'd emphasized at the interview.

The grimness seemed to affect Rick, too. He stared gloomily at each work as they passed by, giving the painting his full attention before glancing at Joy and asking her what she thought. She appreciated that he appeared to consider her opinion. "They're getting worse. I get the feeling we'll find the artist hanging by his neck at the end of the exhibit," she told him. That wouldn't be the first time she'd seen a hanged man, though she'd prayed the last time would end that particular nightmare for her. There was worse than hanging. She had reason to know that, too.

The last thing she needed was reminders of what she'd gone through, but it was all returning to her, flashes of horrors she'd thought she'd banished. She never wanted to forget them, but she never wanted to wake up in the middle of the night sweating and screaming again, either.

These images, although not explicit or specific, threatened to do that. And yet they were purely abstract, no shapes she could recognize for sure. "These are horrible," she muttered.

To her utter shock, he grabbed her hand and towed her up, past startled spectators who turned away from the paintings to stare at them. He ignored her shouted, "Hey!" and because the floor was slippery, she couldn't get a grip to make a stand. His firm hold galvanized her, took her completely by surprise because he made her want it.

He halted. "Sorry," he said, turning to face her, not releasing her hand. "I saw you were upset and I didn't want it to get worse. I'll offer you a confession—I've been here before, and I know how the story ends. We have to carry on."

"Why?"

"Because if we don't, you'll have nightmares."

"No I won't." She wasn't at all sure about that, but she'd take her chances. It was none of his business if he did.

"I think you will. I know the signs."

"What signs?" Irritation rose in her. Was she so easy to read?

"Tense shoulder lines, a frown you probably aren't aware of and slightly dilated pupils."

This close, his own amazing eyes seemed to open a window, enabling him to see right inside her. Joy didn't like it. She'd never allowed anybody that close. And shit, he was close. So much

that his body heat radiated into her, inviting her to snuggle in and let him fold his butter-soft leather jacket around her.

Utter crap. She *never* felt that way. No man had ever protected her from anything, and she'd be offended if they tried. But this man had an allure she couldn't counter. Except to put up her barriers.

Right now her barriers seemed to have deserted her. "Am I that easy to read?" she managed to ask.

"Nope. You're damned difficult, which makes me think you have a tough outer shell."

"Like hard candy?"

"Maybe. Do you have a soft center?"

Yes, she did, but he didn't have to know that. With a brittle laugh, she broke away. "You'll never know, will you?"

This woman intrigued him. Rick didn't deny his attraction to her; he just couldn't understand why. He preferred gentle, undemanding women, the kind that liked spoiling, and petting. The kind that didn't remind him of the horrors he'd endured. He doubted he'd get his hand back if he patted this woman on her cute backside.

Yes, he'd checked her out, of course he had. He might be a new man, or an emancipated male, or whatever they were calling it this year, but he appreciated a lithe shape and a sweet ass. She moved with ease and grace, suggesting a suppleness he was man enough to appreciate. Which was why her first indication of vulnerability hit him like a fist between the eyes.

This woman shouldn't feel vulnerable. He'd like to take whoever had made her feel that way into a quiet room and teach him not to disturb her.

Her hair caught every gleam of light, and in this brightly lit gallery there was a fuckload of it. Her hair shone, not as dark as his but with a gleam of red in the silky tresses. She wore ordinary clothes; jeans and a white blouse, with a thick leather belt and a black jacket. No spiky heels and tight dressed for this one. He liked that.

Now he had her close, and he wanted more. Why should he hide that he wanted her? The savage lurking beneath the trappings of civilization howled for release, but he was used to that particular demon. He remained in control of it, subduing the call to mate. Shit, he'd be thumping his chest and shrieking like Tarzan if he didn't watch out.

He followed her. Fortunately she continued up instead of retreating. He counted that as a good omen. He'd have left if she demanded it. Which she would have done. He read people these days as easily as he'd once read codes, and her body language indicated tension, even fear. Or defiance, he wasn't sure. In a strong person, the difference could be hard to tell.

He lagged behind, enjoying the sway of her body, letting his own relax into an acceptance stance. If she was willing to carry this evening further, he was more than ready. That was for damn sure.

Fuck, he sounded like a stalker! The truth was, she'd bowled him over. He desired her, pure and simple, but he wouldn't cross the line, not for anybody. Not even for a woman as alluring as this one. But he'd do his best to continue with her. That meant giving her space and letting her come to him. Giving her the chance of an out.

His inner savage, the part of him controlled by his other head urged him to take her. She'd be a tough cookie in a fight, and he'd enjoy every minute of it. But men, real men, didn't behave like that. Not in this world, anyway. So he'd let the fantasy lie, and maybe use it in his shower to-

morrow. Because, hell yeah, he'd be recalling her in his shower. And every other part of his house.

This female got under his skin, wriggled about and made herself comfortable. If he didn't get to know her better, it would be a damn shame. If he didn't get her into his bed, he'd regret it for the rest of his life.

The view was good, though.

He watched her step, heavily at first, through the black section of the exhibit, then brisker as blues and yellows began to peer through the cracks. The thick, black paint gave way to chinks of light, seemingly randomly at first, and then the black was slowly but surely pushed back.

They certainly traversed the top part of the exhibition faster than they had the lower, but they still had time to talk. "So the whole thing is one big exhibit?" She turned her lip in a sneer. "Light always defeats darkness? Because in my experience it doesn't."

Her words confirmed his suspicion. She understood darkness and how it could conquer the soul. "I don't think so." He gave his opinion with considered care. "I think it's saying you have to push it back, fight against it until it's defeated." He pointed to a touch of black in the last painting. "Then it makes a comeback and you have to do it all over again."

"Creepy but true." She folded her arms, unconsciously showcasing her breasts. She didn't have much, but what she had made his mouth water. He forced his concentration back to the exhibition. She needed this reassurance. So much that he didn't want to leave her this way. She made small movements that indicated she was nervous or uneasy, but not so much that she felt she had to cover it, as she had earlier. The last piece of art had reassured her a little, brought her back to a place where he could reach her. But she was still uneasy. She had difficulty meeting his eyes.

"You sound like you've had experience."

"In what?" She tilted her chin belligerently.

"In fighting back."

She shrugged, which only displayed her supple body even better. Shit, he had to get a grip. "Most people have."

"Sure enough." But most people didn't have her super-defensive position. As he watched, she drew a deep breath and opened her eyes wide. Someone had taught her to do that. He recognized it as a defense mechanism he taught his own patients. However, she wasn't one of his patients, thank God.

He didn't want to leave her here. Reading through her spiky exterior, he knew she was on edge. To leave anyone in that state went against the grain for him, even less a woman he felt such a strong attraction to.

They stood at the top of a sloping runway, with a small elevator a few steps down a narrow path behind them. He knew because he'd been here before. Had she? He touched her elbow, indicating the downward slope. "Shall we?"

She moved down. He was pretty sure she didn't know about the elevator, and he wasn't about to tell her. She'd be in it, down and out the building in a flash and he needed a little more time.

They ignored the exhibit, and chatted about general matters, but she was careful not to give any details about herself. He liked that she knew how to guard her privacy, even though it was against him. "These paintings were done by a veteran," he told her. "Did you read the catalog?" He glanced over the side of the waist-high parapet. He indicated the glossy brochure she still held. Downstairs, wait staff circulated with trays holding half-filled glasses of wine.

She shook her head. "I glanced at it. I didn't read the biography of the artist. Is he famous?"

A slow smile curved his mouth. He caught her watching, then she blinked quickly a few times and fixed her smile back. "Yes, somewhat. Have you been away?"

"Traveling."

"Anywhere interesting?"

"Not really." She gave a careless shrug.

He'd bet his degrees that was a lie. She'd visited some very interesting places. But he wouldn't push her. Either she'd tell him, or she wouldn't. "The artist has. He's seen most of the black spots of the world. He was in Delta Force. There are rumors he was part of Task Force Black. Heard about that?"

"Maybe."

Interesting. She'd heard of Task Force Black. They were so secret most people doubted they existed. Drawn from the cream of the top armies in the world, working covertly, they linked up to accomplish so-called impossible feats. But in doing so, they shortened wars and the loss of life. The team took out key personnel, stole vital pieces of information for the most part, extracted intelligence workers, or put them in place. Such tasks were routine for Task Force Black.

And she hadn't denied the Task Force existed. Most people scoffed at the idea, but she took it in her stride. "Yeah, but they don't exist, do they?"

"Oh, I don't know," she said. She stared past him to a painting they had examined earlier, refusing to meet his eyes. A faint flush mantled her cheeks. "I can read," she added. "I like thrillers."

Sure she did. "The artist here is rumored to have worked for Task Force Black. You won't find that in the catalog, though. Since he left the army, he's painted his heart out. He left Delta Force with severe PTSD that took him years to work through."

She was breathing faster, her breasts heaving with her short, shallow breaths. He'd pushed her far enough. Any more and she'd bolt. He couldn't live with himself if he did that to her.

He lengthened his stride. "These works of art are the result, and the public like what he does. The mystery around his origins helps, too."

"So he didn't want to write his life story."

"I doubt he'd be allowed. But this *is* his life story. Or some of it, at any rate."

"Poor bastard," she said with deep feeling. For sure she knew something, and she hadn't read it in a novel. However she didn't have the demeanor of someone who'd worked in a covert unit. Rick had good reason to know that range of body languages. Her reactions were too easily read, for one thing. The members of those units were the worst to counsel. There was so much they couldn't talk about, and they had years of covert behaviors to unlearn. But she had some kind of military link. Her upright stance, her brisk walk, and her complete lack of female awareness spoke of it.

He wouldn't pry.

He steered the subject to less stressful topics, talking about New York, and what she liked there, suggesting a few places she might like to visit. She didn't seem interested, but he kept going until they reached the first floor. He glanced at the trays of wine and the chattering people, no doubt discussing the art.

"I think we can do better than this. Hungry?"

She eyed him warily, but didn't answer.

"I know a few good places to eat. They're very public, on the main roads," he added. "Just dinner. I like you, and our conversation is too interesting to leave. Let's talk some more."

He didn't let out his breath until she gave him a cautious "Okay. But we pay our own way." "Sure." Mentally he dismissed a couple of places on his list, the expensive, quiet ones. She'd get edgy in those. He thought of something nice and mid-priced instead. "There's a great Brazilian restaurant within ten minutes' walk of here." If she had any sense she wouldn't get into a taxi with him. Not yet, at any rate. He'd won dinner from her. That would do for now.

What will they do when they find out she's supposed to be his patient? And when the office is invaded by men intent on killing her, what then?

Read the rest of the book here: <https://www.amazon.com/dp/B01MYM9OH7>