



TREY

RED, HOT & BLUE

CAT JOHNSON

They can't deny the heat—it's the only thing keeping them alive.

Red Hot & Blue, Book 1

A distracted soldier is a dead soldier. That's special operative Trey Williams' motto. The last thing he needs in his life is a girlfriend. Problem is, the woman who's been recruited to pose as his wife on a special assignment is proving to be exactly the kind of distraction he can't afford.

Years ago, Carly McAfee turned her back not only on her military career, but the men who come with it. So why did she say yes to a mission that puts her in intimate contact with Trey, under 24/7 surveillance by both bad guys and good? One slip, and they're both dead. It's not long, though, before her body betrays her, followed closely by her heart.

With a terrorist arms deal going down and missing teammate's life on the line, Carly and Trey must throw caution to the wind in the scorching-hot performance of their lives—and try not to lose their hearts and minds in the process.

This book has been previously published and has been revised and expanded from its original release.

Warning: Contains bad men with big guns and video cameras, and an unmarried couple who need to get naked and get busy acting very married to save both their country and their lives.

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Trey
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Trey

Cat Johnson

Dedication

Dedicated to men and women in uniform, and their families, around the world. In addition, a huge thanks goes to Sean, whose real-life training provided the details for the opening scene.

Any mistakes made or liberties taken with the facts are purely my own.

Chapter One

He waited, crouching in the reeds. An RPG launcher pressed into his shoulder as he watched for the enemy from his hiding place along the road.

His persistence finally paid off. He heard the US force moving toward him. Training gave him the patience to hold until they were dead ahead. *Dead*. He grinned at that thought since for all intents and purposes they would soon be dead.

Zeroing in on his target, he sighted and then fired. The rocket-propelled grenade cut through the air with a trail of smoke and its unmistakable sound. The soldiers heard it coming, but it was too late. That tended to be the problem with RPGs. By the time you heard them coming you were as good as gone.

The explosion caused the soldiers on foot to fall where they stood. The vehicles behind the ground pounders stopped, the passengers scurrying out. He smiled as he watched their panic.

Nothing felt as good as a successful mission. He hadn't totally destroyed the force, but he'd done quite a bit of damage with just the one RPG. Enough to teach them a lesson and hadn't that been his goal to begin with? Though right now, it was time to get moving.

He cupped his hands around his mouth. "*Allah achbar!*" God is great.

That little bit of shouted Arabic had the soldiers scrambling faster than even the incoming RPG had.

Sorry he couldn't stick around to watch the aftermath, he took off running as a spray of gunfire peppered the area where he'd been. Amid the noise, he heard the scattered orders and curses behind him as the soldiers tried to get their fallen men to cover.

He sped to the next previously selected point of attack, then launched another rocket, this time at one of the trucks. The soldiers would think there were more attackers hiding than there actually were because of the multiple assaults in rapid succession from different locations.

That done, he took off for cover farther away. He wouldn't strike again just yet. Let them think the danger had passed, then he and his team would hit with an improvised explosive device when it was least expected. A nice IED would shake things up. He was getting bored with the old Russian RPG launcher anyway. Improvised explosive devices were much more fun and, when you knew what you were doing, child's play to set up. His team probably had a few in place already.

After reaching a point a safe distance from the strike zone, he hit the ground behind an outcropping of rock. Enjoying a rare, brief moment of leisure, he pulled a bottle of water out of his pack and took a long

swallow. He wiped a dribble from his beard with the back of one hand just as footsteps to his right drew his attention.

“Pigeon Two approaching Songbird from the north.” The voice came through his earpiece just before his teammate hit the ground next to him, looking as dirty and sweaty as he felt. “Hey, Trey. Nice explosions.”

“Thanks, Jack.” His throat dry, Trey took another swig.

“Bull and I set up the IEDs.” Jack pulled out his own bottle and took a swallow. It had been a long, hot day for everyone, and it wasn’t over yet.

“How many?”

“A pretty obvious primary in the middle of the road with a secondary one better hidden on the side path just off the main route in case they try to drive around the first one.”

Scratching an itch the newly grown beard caused, Trey nodded. “They’ll see the first one right away.”

“Exactly, and they’ll most likely try to avoid it by driving on the path where they’ll hit the second one.”

“Or they could move backward and fire upon the primary to disarm it.”

“Yup, and they’ll back up over the third one we put behind them. Bull’s got it hidden so well I’m not sure I’d find it if I hadn’t been with him when he set it up. Once they’ve backed up to decide what to do about the one in front of them, Bull will detonate. Then *kaboom*.” Jack grinned like a kid on Christmas morning.

Trey laughed. “You’re evil.”

“Hey, why not enjoy ourselves?” Jack shook his head. “I’m kinda sorry this exercise is over after today. I love OPFOR training.”

“Hell, who doesn’t love it?”

An explosion sounded in the distance and Jack laughed. “Those guys who just got blown up by Bull’s IED, that’s who.”

“Bull sets up a nice explosion, even his fake ones.” Trey admired the skill. He could set up a decent IED himself, but Bull was a master craftsman at it.

“I am gonna laugh my ass off watching their reaction on the video tape during the after-action review tonight. This is easier than shooting beer cans off a fence post. A helluva lot more fun too.” Jack chuckled.

“It’s definitely better playing the bad guys than the good guys in these exercises.” Trey knew well it may be fun, but opposition-force training was crucial. It could save the lives of the troops deploying to regions where the bad guys were actually out to kill them.

Portraying the enemy in these exercises was definitely one of the better parts of his job, except for the damn itchy beard the team had to grow so they’d look more like terrorists and less like members of Task Force Zeta.

“Shit, this thing itches.” Trey dug his fingernails through the newly grown hair to get to the skin causing him torture. No amount of scratching seemed to help. It must have been all the sweating he’d done that day combined with the dust and dirt. Thank God, he could shave soon. The sooner the better.

Jack touched his own face. “I don’t know why yours is bothering you so much. Mine’s just fine. I kinda like the facial hair. Chicks love it.”

“Chicks?” Trey frowned. “What chicks? We’ve been in the field for nearly a week with no one but the team and that unit of soldiers we just blew up.”

“I stopped shaving a week before this exercise started and I caught that cute bartender giving me the eye before we left. She liked it, all right. I could tell. I’m planning on swinging by the bar the minute we’re done here.” Jack glanced down at his dirt-covered camouflage. “Maybe I’ll hit the showers and change first.”

Trey raised an eyebrow. “Good idea, but wait. Are you saying that’s two weeks’ worth of growth on your face?”

Jack barely had stubble covering his chin. Trey on the other hand felt like he was approaching mountain-man length.

“What? It’s filling in.” Jack stroked the peach fuzz on his upper lip.

Laughing, Trey nodded. “Yup. I can almost see it now.”

“Hey, my hair’s a lighter color than yours. It takes longer to show up.”

“Your brother’s beard showed up just fine before he left for Kosovo.”

“Jimmy’s older than me.” Jack scowled.

Smothering a laugh, Trey nodded. “Yeah, you’re right. Those couple of years make a big difference.”

Eyes narrowed, Jack shoved the water bottle back into his pack. “I’m going to check on the IED status with Bull.”

“Okay.” Trey controlled his smile until he was alone again. Jack was so easy to rile it almost didn’t seem fair teasing him.

The sound of another explosion filled the air and Jack’s beard, or lack thereof, was blown clear out of Trey’s mind. He shook his head. Those soldiers had a lot to learn before they deployed, and his team was just the one to teach it to them, even if they had to learn the hard way.

God, he loved his job.

Chapter Two

“Vodka tonic, gin and tonic, diet cola, regular cola and a bottle of beer.” The bleached-blond cocktail waitress snapped her gum and read off her scribbled list.

Trey leaned his forearms against the bar rail. Happy to be clean-shaven again and out of the dusty, ripe cammies from the previous day’s final exercise, he was more than content to simply sit and watch the bartender work.

After picking up two glasses in each hand, she packed them with ice and then lined them up in front of her on the bar. She poured the liquor with her left hand while operating the soda gun with her right. Not even glancing at the bottles in the speed rack, she just grabbed, poured and then returned them to their proper places.

Leaning on the bar next to him, an also-beard-free Jack watched her too while shaking his head. “Ooo wee, how can someone look so hot and act so cold?”

“She’s just busy.” Trey kept his voice low.

Jack laughed. “Oh, believe me, she can get cold as ice. Just ask her out a few times and you’ll see.”

Trey had seen each and every time Jack had asked this woman out and gotten a no in response.

“Hey there, darlin’. Coupla longnecks over here when you get a chance.” Jack raised his voice and called out to her.

Trey frowned. “Jeez, Jack. Give her a second. She’s got her hands full.”

Without even glancing their way, the bartender lined a cocktail tray with the drinks, calling them off for the gum-snapping blond as she did so. “Vodka tonic has two straws, gin and tonic one straw, diet’s got a lemon and regular doesn’t.”

She turned her back to the two of them, reached down into a fridge against the wall behind the bar and came up with three longneck beer bottles in one hand.

Trey had to admit, the view was pretty nice from there with her bending over in those tight jeans. No wonder she sold so much bottled beer. Pretty much every guy on the base came in when they were stateside and ninety-nine percent of them ordered the bottled beer strictly for the view.

With an economy of motion he had to appreciate, she popped the tops off the bottles using the bar-mounted opener, letting the caps plunk one by one into the garbage pail positioned perfectly underneath to catch them.

She placed one bottle in the center of the drinks on the cocktail tray. “And there’s the beer.”

Finished with the waitress, she slapped two cocktail napkins down in front of them and plopped the remaining two beers in her hand on top of them. “And there are your beers, *darlin’*.”

Trey had to smile at the verbal slap aimed directly at Jack until she turned to him next. “And I can do more than one thing at a time, but thanks for your concern.”

Just when you thought she wasn’t listening... Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jack enjoying his discomfort now.

Trey shrugged. “Looked more like seven things at once to me.” He raised his bottle in a mock toast to her and drank.

“Hey, *darlin’*. Why don’t you give in and go out with me? Give up all this cat and mouse. Games are fun and all, but I know we could have a lot more fun together.”

Would Jack ever stop trying? His resilience never ceased to amaze Trey.

“Okay. I’ll go out with you.” She walked over to them and leaned right up against the bar, her well-rounded breasts pushing the boundaries of the neckline of her tight T-shirt. “On one condition.”

Trey had never seen Jack so flustered before in all the time he’d known him. Jack had been asking this woman out for years now and this was as close as he’d ever come to an actual yes.

Jack swallowed hard and finally wrestled his eyes up from her chest. “W-what’s that, *darlin’*?”

“What’s my name?” She slapped each palm flat on the bar and waited for the answer.

Jack’s mouth opened, but no sound came out. Trey paused a moment himself. She had a point. They’d been coming here a good two years now and she’d served them most times, but he’d be damned if he knew her name.

She smiled and shook her head. “Didn’t think so.” She walked away as the waitress returned to give her the cash for the drinks. Trey watched her glance at them in the reflection of the mirror behind the bar as she opened the register and made change.

“Why didn’t you remember her name?” Jack backhanded Trey’s leg. “Dang it. I was as happy as a puppy with two peters when she said she’d go out with me. I nearly shit my pants. Then she comes up with some stupid question. I didn’t think there’d be a test first.”

As Jack scowled, Trey shook his head. “It wasn’t a stupid question. She’s right. We should know after all this time. Besides the team, we probably spend more hours here with her than with anyone else in our lives and we don’t even know her name.”

Jack frowned and broke his gaze away from watching the nameless bartender. Staring right at Trey now, Jack cocked his head to one side. “What is all this tonight? First it’s ‘Don’t bother her, she’s busy’. Now it’s ‘She’s right, we should know her name’. You better not be snooping around her. Teammates don’t steal each other’s women. It’s in the code.”

Trey rolled his eyes and let out a short laugh. “First of all, I’m not snooping around, as you put it. Second, if she’s your woman, learn her damn name.”

Jack banged his bottle onto the bar. "I will." He glanced around until his attention landed on the waitress. "Baby cakes, sashay your sweet self on over here."

The willing waitress arrived immediately after his summons in a cloud of perfume mixed with grape gum. She had on so much makeup her eyelashes stuck together when she tried to bat them at Jack. "Hey, boys. I don't get to hang with you two usually. You're always sitting at the bar instead of at my tables. What can I do for you?"

Jack fielded that question while Trey took another swig of beer. He noticed that while he and Jack had been arguing the bartender had left briefly. She returned now with a rack of clean stemmed glasses. Hoisting the unwieldy item onto the bar with a clang, she started to hang the glasses one by one upside-down above the bar.

Glancing at Jack as he flirted with the waitress, she raised a brow. "Moved on already, has he? I'm heartbroken."

Trey laughed. He considered telling her Jack was sweet talking the waitress in an attempt to find out her name. Instead, without even knowing why he did it, he extended his arm to her. "I'm Trey Williams."

She looked down at his offered hand and then back to his face. After a moment, she wiped her fingers on a bar rag and took his in a firm, strong grasp. "Carly McAfee."

He smiled and repeated it. "Carly."

"Yeah, short for Charlene. Thank God my parents realized I wasn't a Charlene pretty early on and gave me the nickname."

"What's wrong with the name Charlene?"

She glanced at the miniskirt-wearing waitress still talking with Jack. "I'd have to look like *her* to pull off a name like Charlene." She shook her head. "No, I'm definitely a Carly."

Trey took in her straight brown hair pulled into a ponytail to fully expose a pretty, fresh face. If she wore makeup at all, it didn't scream to be noticed. Her girl-next-door looks sat just fine with him. The centerfold-worthy, shapely jean-clad hips, small waist and even shapelier T-shirt-covered breasts didn't hurt either.

She was a strange cocktail of simplicity mixed with attitude, shaken with killer good looks. More importantly, he could tell there was a brain in that pretty head of hers.

Jack, leaning forward, interrupted Trey's reverie regarding Carly's assets. "Hey, darlin'. I want another chance at this date. Come over here and ask me your question again."

She rolled her eyes and walked to stand in front Jack. "I'll give you one more chance, but the question has changed."

"Lay it on me, sweet cheeks." Jack grinned wide.

Looking overly confident, Jack leaned back on the barstool and waited for the question. He must have gleaned quite a bit of information from his discussion with the waitress.

Carly covered her eyes with one hand. "What color are my eyes?"

Jack, who never used bad language in mixed company, silently mouthed a vile curse before venturing an obviously blind guess. "Uh, brown?"

"Wrong." She turned, opened the beer cooler and began checking her stock of cold bottles.

Scowling, Jack cursed again quietly. "Watch my beer, will ya'? I've gotta go take a leak."

Trey nodded and Jack disappeared into the bathroom.

Eyes still on Carly's back, he whispered, "They're green."

She spun, those beautiful jade-colored eyes open wide and staring straight at him.

Damn, she had good ears. He'd have to remember that in the future.

Their gazes collided and his heart clenched. He reminded himself it was Jack who had a crush on this girl, not him. All of his friend's going on and on about her must have rubbed off. What he felt wasn't real. It couldn't be, because Trey had no room in his life for a girlfriend right now. A distracted soldier was a dead soldier. He didn't want a girlfriend, nor did he need one. Not now and definitely not Carly, the one girl Jack was obsessed with.

So why did he suddenly feel like if he didn't get far away from her soon, he'd forget his own rule and want a girlfriend? Want her.

Trey took a swig of beer and swallowed hard. He then lent all of his concentration to peeling the label off the bottle in an attempt to avoid getting pulled further into those eyes of hers.

He was thankful when Jack returned and broke the spell.

Jack sat, frowning. "What's up with you now? You look like a hog living with a family who's got a hankering for bacon."

As miserably conflicted as he felt at the moment, Trey couldn't help but laugh. Jack's Southern farmisms always managed to lighten the mood. It didn't matter whether the two of them were on a mission or on a barstool.

Good old Jack. In spite of the fact he didn't know her name or the color of her eyes, Jack really did like Carly, or actually believed he did anyway. Sure, Trey could be attracted to her as far as appreciating her good looks. He was a man after all. It was only natural for a guy to notice a cute woman who also supplied him with all the beer he could drink.

It was no wonder Jack thought he had the hots for her. Trey glanced at Jack now and watched him watching Carly as she moved behind the bar serving customers.

"You didn't answer me." Jack broke his gaze away from Carly's butt as she stood at the cash register and turned back to him. He must really be interested in what was bothering Trey to make that supreme sacrifice.

What the hell was he supposed to tell him? He'd gotten semi-hard just from looking into the eyes of the woman his best friend wanted?

Trey shook his head. “Nothing’s up. Just gets to me when there’s no real action for a while. Training is one thing, but it’s been too quiet otherwise.”

He was good at lying. He’d been taught the fine art of deception well by Uncle Sam.

“Jeez, Trey. Don’t say things like that. You’ll curse us both and we’ll get called in for some big op that’ll take us away for six months to some godforsaken place halfway around the world. Just when I’m making some progress with this one.” He tilted his head in Carly’s direction.

“You call that progress, do you?” Trey laughed.

“Hey, it’s the most I’ve gotten out of her in years. I’m one step closer to breaking down the fence to her corral. I can feel it.”

Trey smiled as Jack’s euphemism brought to mind farmers’ daughters and rolling in the hay. There was nothing like some good old farm imagery to put naughty thoughts into an already horny boy’s head. But thoughts of sex and farms would have to wait because just then both his and Jack’s pagers went off simultaneously.

“Buckets of bull crap. You did this, you know, with all your talk about how quiet it was.” Jack gave him a very nasty look and threw a ten-dollar bill on the bar. “I should make you pay for this round since you’re the one who cursed us.”

Carly came to their side of the bar to clear away the bottles. “Leaving so soon, boys?” Her sweet sincerity was not sounding all that sincere.

“Don’t you worry, darlin’—I mean Carly. I’ll be back.” Jack winked at her.

“I have no doubt.” Then she dropped the sarcastic attitude and sobered. “Home safe, guys.”

Trey knew she was well aware they weren’t heading home, but most likely out on an assignment. There were guys she served who never made it home from their ops. He nodded an acknowledgment for her concern. “Thanks.”

On the base he and Jack strolled into the meeting room and found the rest of the team already assembled. He was happy they’d only had time for one beer each, because judging by the look on the commander’s face something was up and it wasn’t good.

“Sit down.” The commander gestured to the two chairs still empty at the long table. He looked directly at Jack. “I’ve gotten a new SITREP. We’ve lost touch with Jimmy.”

At the news revealed in the latest situation report, Trey glanced quickly at Jack as his own stomach sank. Jimmy Gordon was not just Jack’s older brother. He was his father figure, his hero and the reason he’d joined both the military and this team.

Jack shook his head with obvious disbelief or maybe just outright denial. “He’s deep undercover, sir. He can’t be phoning home everyday to ask what’s for dinner.”

The commander nodded his head. “I know, son. But we’ve picked up a lot of chatter on the lines lately. Things that make us believe he may have been compromised.”

“So we’re going in to get him. Right, sir?”

Trey could hear the panic in Jack’s voice.

The commander shook his head. “No, Gordon. We’re not.”

Jack stood. “What do you mean no?”

Trey cringed. Jack was upset and coming very close to crossing the line into insubordination.

The commander stood firm. “Sit down, soldier.”

Jack set his jaw and sat, but just barely, on the very edge of his seat.

When he was seated again, if not settled, the commander continued. “We’re going to give him some more time to make contact. In the meantime, I want the entire team on standby and ready to leave on thirty seconds notice if needed. Got it?”

The group nodded, all except for Jack whose eyes were glazed over. When Jack spoke, Trey could hear the strain in his voice. “Permission to be excused, sir.”

The commander nodded and Jack was out the door in a heartbeat.

Chapter Three

Carly took advantage of the slow night to get some much needed organizing and cleaning done around the bar and in the rear storeroom. There was only one table currently occupied and they had a full pitcher of beer and eyes only for each other. She had a feeling they wouldn't even finish their pitcher before one or the other couldn't take it anymore and they rushed home, or at least out to the parking lot, to have sex.

She was used to women coming in just to hook up with guys from the base. Women made up close to half her business so she really shouldn't complain. Carly knew she shouldn't judge either. If these women wanted to sleep with men they knew nothing about just because they were in the armed forces it was their choice. Just like it was her prerogative to choose not to date anyone who is, was or was even thinking about being in the military.

Too bad almost every man in her bar was military. That's what she got for buying a bar directly next to a base. A daily buffet of off-limits and hotter-than-hell men who'd love you and leave you lonely in the end.

Glancing out the storeroom door so she could see the amorous couple, she tried not to think of how many of these guys had girlfriends or wives waiting at home while their tongues were down other women's throats. Feeling a little bit sick to her stomach at the thought, she unloaded more of the case of cocktail olives onto the shelves when she heard a soft knock on the doorframe behind her.

Turning around, she saw who it was and smiled. "Hi. I'm surprised to see you back here so soon. After both of your pagers went off at the same time I figured I wouldn't see you guys for awhile."

He laughed, but it sounded far from happy. "Yeah. Me too."

Putting the last one of the glass jars on the shelf, Carly completed her task. She glanced at the status of her other customers past... What was his name? She thought she'd heard him called Jack.

Jack. The joking, colorful Southern sidekick to the quiet but observant Trey Williams.

Carly pushed aside the image of Trey and his golden brown eyes a girl could get lost in and brown wavy hair just made for running your fingers through. That man was too tempting. Dark and brooding was exactly her type or had been once. Before her ex.

The man before her now was too damn cute himself as well as far too persistent in his attentions toward her. Southern gentlemen and their trademark drawl always had gotten to her, ever since she'd first

seen *Gone with the Wind* as a kid. You didn't get much more Southern than Jack, and he was pretty much the exact opposite of her ex which was tempting in itself.

She shook the thought from her brain. Nope. No more military men. In fact, recently there'd been no men at all. It was just safer that way.

Carly had a customer to serve, if she could wrestle her mind off the topic of her pitiful love life, or lack thereof. "I'm assuming you're here for a drink."

"No rush. I can wait until you've finished what you're doing."

Not even one "darlin'"? Interesting. "It's okay. I'm done."

Leaving the now-empty cardboard box in the storeroom, she led the way to the bar with Jack following sheepishly behind. When he didn't immediately come out with some colorful comment or start flirting with her, she took a closer look. There was definitely something wrong. He was alone too, which he never was.

Could she ask where Trey was without it looking like she was overly interested? Which she definitely was not.

The suspense of wondering what was up with Jack and why Trey wasn't with him was killing her. The only reason her unsatisfied curiosity didn't actually kill her was because she gave in to it. Damn it. So much for self-restraint.

"You all alone tonight?" Carly could have kicked herself. She shouldn't care what was up with them because she definitely was not interested in any man in the military. So why did she care where Trey was or what was wrong with Jack?

"Yup. All alone." Jack drew in a deep breath and then let it out slowly.

"Beer?" She turned toward the beer cooler, but his voice stopped her.

"No beer tonight, darlin'. Bourbon. Double, straight up and keep 'em coming."

Raising a brow, she poured a long double shot into a glass and then slid a basket full of pretzels in front of him. It wasn't much, but at least it was something to soak up the alcohol. The problem was he made no move to touch the food. Instead, he downed the drink in one swallow and pushed the glass toward her. She hesitantly refilled it.

This was going to be bad. She could see that already. Something was very wrong. Wondering what the hell had happened, she couldn't help but move on to considering once again where Trey might be. Why he wasn't here? Every scenario she came up with wasn't good.

If Jack, Trey and their friends were black ops, as she suspected from various clues she'd picked up from being around them for years, Trey could be dead. She'd never know for sure. He'd just disappear one day, after which his buddies would probably get drunk for one single night of silent grieving.

When Jack downed the second as quickly as the first and pushed the glass in her direction again, she feared for the worst.

She covered his hand with hers. "You might want to slow down a little bit."

He gave her a crooked smile. "Don't worry, baby cakes. My daddy was a drunk. It's in my blood." He pushed the glass closer to her and tapped it again. "Thanks for worrying though."

Refilling it, she drew in a deep breath, beginning to get ill with worry. That was another reason to not date military men, their tendency to get shot at and blown up.

They'd only left her place an hour ago. How could something possibly have happened to Trey in that short a time and so close to base? It had to be something else. Meanwhile, she had more pressing problems than imagining what had befallen Trey. Jack was downing whiskey faster than she could pour it. She better think of something fast or she'd have one messy drunk on her hands, no matter what he said about being able to handle his liquor.

"Um, I have something I have to do in the storeroom. I'll be right back." If she disappeared for a bit and wasn't there to refill his glass, he'd have to stop drinking.

"That's fine, darlin'. Just leave the bottle."

"Um, I can't. Sorry. State liquor law." She was making things up now, but it sounded good.

He smiled. "You're just trying to slow me down. I'm trained to know what people are thinking, but if I don't get drunk here I'll just get drunk somewhere else. I can tell you I'd rather do it here with you than with some stranger."

She sighed, her heart breaking for him. In spite of the constant flirting, he was a nice guy and he was obviously in pain. Reaching out again, she squeezed his hand. "Then do it for me, Jack. Slow down just a little bit."

He looked at her. Really looked at her for the first time. Not at her boobs, not at her ass, but at her. Then his crooked smile appeared again. "You know my name."

"Yes." She nodded, happy she'd gotten it right.

"Huh. And I never bothered to learn yours. No wonder you don't want to go out with me. I don't blame you one bit." He downed the third shot in one gulp.

Great. Now no matter what had been wrong with him when he'd first gotten here, his current problem was with her, compounded by the self-pity that alcohol enhanced so well.

She'd have to wait for him to go to the men's room and then water down the bottle. Carly knew for a fact that was against the law, but she was running out of options. She could cut him off, but she knew he would just go somewhere else and probably end up in a gutter or in jail. Neither option was a good one.

Watering down the bourbon was probably her best course of action. He was far enough gone he wouldn't notice, but since he wasn't drinking beer it may be a long while until he needed the men's room.

Jack pushed his glass toward her one more time. Carly sighed and then got an idea. "How about a proposition?"

He raised a brow and then laughed. "I never thought I'd hear myself say this, but I'm not really in the mood for a proposition tonight, darlin'."

Sadly, she returned his smile. "I can see that, Jack. It's not that kind of proposition."

"Good, because I would really kick myself in the morning if it was and I said no."

At least he was talking to her. Talking was good. Less time for drinking.

"The deal is a truth for a drink. So for this next shot you have to tell me what's got you in such a mood tonight you wouldn't even accept a proposition from me." She held the bottle in the air temptingly as bait.

"No can do, darlin'. You've been slinging beer behind this bar long enough to know everything is top secret 'round here, right down to what time the general takes a dump in the morning. Excuse my coarseness."

She'd heard way worse than "dump" behind the bar, but at least now she knew it was something to do with his unit. If it were woman trouble or even a fight with Trey, it wouldn't be top secret and he'd tell her.

He nudged the glass a bit with one finger. She filled it and he downed it. At this rate, he'd be passed out long before closing.

The couple in the booth finally made their move and groped their way out the door without even a backward glance. That afforded Carly an excuse to put the bottle safely away under the bar and go clean off their table. It would buy her a few minutes at least.

To her surprise, Jack followed and sprawled out on the recently vacated and still-warm booth bench.

"Thought I'd check things out over here for a bit." He leaned his head against the red vinyl. "Mmm. Comfy."

Poor guy. At least he was away from the bar and the bottle. She grabbed the pitcher and dirty glasses and brought them to the kitchen to be washed later. When she returned, she got a rag from behind the bar. As quietly as she could, she wiped down the table, hoping Jack would sleep off both the bad mood and the liquor.

"You don't have to creep around, darlin'. I'm not sleeping."

So much for her plan. Leaving the rag on the table, she sat next to him in the booth, thinking how bartending and babysitting were very much alike at times. She didn't move when he let his head drop onto her shoulder. "Maybe you should get some sleep, Jack."

His head rolled toward her. "I know you ever going out with me is about as likely as a bull giving birth, but I want you to know I appreciate you pretending to like me tonight."

"I'm not pretending. You're a good guy, Jack. What's not to like?"

"Hmm. I'll have to consider that when I'm a little more sober, but you being nice tonight means a lot. I'm really sorry I didn't know what color your eyes are."

"That's all right. I don't know what color yours are either."

He laughed. "Then I guess we're even."

"I guess we are." She smiled.

"Carly." Jack's voice was sounding sleepier and more Southern with every sentence.

"Yes, Jack." She figured he had about five minutes left before he was out like a light.

He slid lower and laid his head in her lap. "I really do like you."

She looked down at him. "I like you too. That's not the issue. I don't date guys in the military."

"What if I weren't in the military?" His lids drifted closed.

"But you are." Lightly, she stroked his sandy-colored hair. It felt softer than she expected against her fingertips.

"Yeah, I am, but maybe just for tonight you could pretend I'm not." He opened his eyes, which she noted were hazel and glassy with tears.

She had a feeling the tears weren't over her, but caused by whatever had brought him here so upset in the first place. Because of that, she nodded. "All right, Jack. Just for tonight."

Reaching up, he pulled her head down to his. He gave her the sweetest, gentlest kiss she'd ever been given by any man. Suddenly, she felt more than pity for him.

He cupped her face, ran his thumb over her lower lip and smiled. "That was nice."

Carly swallowed hard. "Yeah, it was."

"Have one dinner with me. In a public place. Nothing more. That's all I'm asking. What d'ya say, darlin'?" His sad eyes showed a glimmer of hope.

Her heart twisted for him. "I'll think about it."

"A maybe is better than a no. Thank you." A small smile curved his lips and his hand captured hers. He brought her fingers to his lips and kissed them gently before his eyelids drifted shut again. "I'm just gonna close my eyes and rest for a sec."

"That's fine, Jack. You go ahead."

Almost instantly his breathing became deep and regular. Carly glanced down helplessly. A two-hundred-pound drunk and sleeping man had her pinned in the booth. Though it had been a really, really long time since a man had had her pinned anywhere, she'd need to get up eventually, especially if customers came in. Not to mention she had to get Jack home somehow and she didn't even know where he lived.

Her glance caught on a square outline pressing through the denim of his jeans. Sliding her hand into his pocket, she reached for it with the tips of her fingers but couldn't quite get what she hoped was a cell phone out of the tight confines. She pushed her hand deeper and got a handful of more than just phone.

Swallowing hard at the knowledge she'd just basically stroked him pretty intimately without meaning to, she halted all motion. Then he groaned, moving his hips to press himself farther into her hand. Stuck

between a rock and a hard place, she decided to just go for it and fast. Reaching deeper into his pocket, she grabbed and pulled out the phone.

Holding her breath, Carly watched and waited for his eyelids to open, but he didn't wake. Sighing in relief, she turned her attention to the cell phone and scrolled through the address book. This was a huge invasion of privacy, not to mention probably a breach of national security, but desperate times called for desperate measures.

It had been turned off, which told her he hadn't wanted to talk to anyone. Though he'd come to be with her. Of course, she did have alcohol, but as he'd said, he could get that anywhere.

She was overthinking things. The man was upset and had come to a familiar place to forget whatever he needed to forget. That was all. She couldn't let herself read anything more into it.

Scrolling quickly through Jack's saved phone contacts, she found a bunch of names she didn't recognize. Even the names of Jack's teammates she did know from the bar, she didn't feel she knew well enough to call about this.

Finally, she hit on Trey's name. Taking a deep breath, she pressed the call button, put the phone to her ear and listened to the ringing.

*

Trey drove past Jack's apartment on his way home, but his convertible wasn't there. There'd been no phone call from him either, not on Trey's cell or his house phone. Worse, when Trey had called Jack's cell earlier it had gone directly to voice mail. He must have turned his phone off even though the commander had told them they were all on standby. Wherever Jack was and whatever he was doing, he didn't want to be disturbed.

He tried to convince himself his friend was a big boy and could take care of himself. Then he found himself carrying both his cell phone and his portable house phone into the bathroom with him and laying them on the sink while he showered in case Jack called. He *was* on standby, he reminded himself so he wouldn't feel foolish waiting around like some girl sitting by the phone after a first date.

Worry squelched any interest in food, but the angry grumble of his empty stomach reminded him he needed to eat. A leftover pork chop in the fridge was just calling his name when his cell phone finally rang. He jumped to answer it when *Jack* appeared on the readout.

"Jack. You okay?"

"Um, Trey? It's not Jack. It's Carly down at the bar. Jack's here with me but he's had a lot to drink."

Trey's eyes opened wide. Carly. On Jack's phone. It took him a second to shake off the shock. "You still at the bar now?"

"Yeah."

“Okay. Keep him there. I’ll be right over. And don’t let him drive.” Trey was already shoving his feet into his sneakers.

“Of course I won’t let him drive. He’s drunk. How stupid do you think I am?” Her annoyance traversed the phone lines perfectly clearly.

He let out a breath of frustration. “I’m sorry. I’ve just been worried about him. Hang tight. I’m leaving now.”

She let out a short laugh. “Oh, believe me. I’m not going anywhere.”

Trey understood the meaning of her last statement the moment he walked into the bar and found Jack passed out in Carly’s lap in a booth toward the rear.

He winced. “How long has he been like this?”

“Passed out? Or drunk?” She cocked a brow.

“Uh, both I guess.”

“He came in about an hour ago, downed four double shots of bourbon in under ten minutes, then passed out just before I called you. I didn’t know what else to do. His cell phone was right there in his um pants. When I found your name in his call list...” She shrugged and let the sentence trail off.

“It’s fine. I’m glad you called me.” Trey couldn’t help but notice how she kept stroking Jack’s hair even though he was well past the point of knowing it. For some reason, it was really bothering him.

He walked over, squatted down and shook Jack by the shoulder. “Hey, buddy. Time to wake up.”

Jack moaned and rolled away from Trey and toward Carly. He draped one arm around her waist and snuggled deeper into her lap. Great. That was even worse.

Trey jiggled him harder. He started slapping him lightly on the cheek and then not so lightly.

“Hey, be gentle. The poor guy’s having a tough night.” Carly frowned up at Trey.

He sighed deeply. “I know.”

“Do you know what’s the matter?”

“Um, yeah but...” Trey debated what to tell her.

“You can’t tell me. Never mind.” She leaned down to Jack, stroked his face and spoke softly into his ear. “Jack, sweetie. You need to wake up for me.”

So it was *sweetie* now. Just great and of course, sweetie-pie Jack woke right up for her and smiled even though his eyes didn’t quite look focused.

“Hey, darlin’.” He sat up, put a hand to his head and then blew out a breath. “This place is spinning like a tilt-a-whirl at the state fair. Oh, hey there, Trey. When’d you get here?”

“Just now.” Trey was not in the mood for conversation at the moment. He grabbed Jack by one arm and around the waist. Supporting his weight, he guided him toward the door. “Time for bed, Jack.”

Unfortunately, Jack wasn’t quite done yet. He turned to Carly. “Night, darlin’.”

She smiled, an actual, genuine smile. “Night, Jack.”

“We were pretending I’m not in the military. Trey, she’s a really good kisser.” That little gem of a revelation caused Trey to trip over his own feet.

This ridiculously surreal situation would have been laughable if Trey weren’t so miserable. “That’s great, Jack. Thanks for telling me.”

Perhaps Jack would vomit in his truck next, then Trey’s evening would really be complete.

Chapter Four

“It has come to our attention our target has a meeting scheduled with an American man suspected of small-arms dealing.” The commander stood at the head of the table as he addressed the six men.

The entire team sat a little straighter in their seats at the promise of action, even Jack, who had to be one hurting puppy at the moment. Trey was surprised to see him upright at the meeting at O-eight-hundred after practically scraping him off Carly’s lap the night before. He tried to block the image out of his mind. *She’s a really good kisser.* He gritted his teeth.

“We detained the bastard and his new wife on their way to the meet. When questioned, he said the wife knew nothing about it. She thinks he sells computer software. He brought her along as cover. Says he figured homeland security and customs wouldn’t look so hard at a married couple.”

“Real sweet guy,” one of the team mumbled.

The commander laughed. “Yeah, model husband. Lights out, please.” Someone hit the lights and the commander flipped the photos of a man and woman on the wall screen.

“Meet Mr. and Mrs. Smith. The target is currently unaware his associate is now a guest of the US military and we intend on keeping it that way by replacing the Smiths with two of our own. With some gentle persuasion, our guest downstairs admitted he’s never met or spoken directly to our target. They have corresponded only by email and we are now in possession of his computer and all of its files, which back up his story. Although I bet the target has done his research and may have photos. So our replacements should be as close as possible in physical appearance, but at least they don’t have to be exact. With only internet contact we won’t have to worry about voice matching either. Lights on.”

The lights came back on, leaving the images on the wall screen still visible, but dull. “That, boys, is the good news. The bad news is the rendezvous with the target is tomorrow and we need to find our replacements, bring them up to speed and fly them overseas before then. This does have an important upside. The team will be flying over too, putting us in perfect position to gather information about our missing man. At that time we can locate and if necessary extract him.”

Jack sat forward at the mention of his brother. “I’ll do it, sir. I’ll meet with the target.” He glanced at the stats of the male on the wall. “We’re close in coloring and about the same height and weight. I can do this, sir.”

“No. Out of the question.”

“Why, sir?”

“Because you’re too close to this, Gordon.”

“You can trust me, sir. He’s my brother.”

“That is exactly why you’re not going in undercover, Gordon.” The commander turned to Trey. “Williams. It’s going to be you. You look close enough and you speak the language. You’ll be able to get around the country easier knowing the native language in case things go bad. Although you’ll have to pretend you only speak English since our couple’s linguistic skills are limited to their native language. All this info will be in the briefing materials. You’ll have to review it on the flight over. The couple’s plane is scheduled to depart this morning.”

Bull, called that because he was as big as one, raised his hand. “Sir, what about the female?”

He’d asked the exact question Trey had been thinking.

“That’s the biggest obstacle right now. We have one hour to get us a trained female from somewhere on this base who looks like *that*.” They all looked up at the image of the hot, shapely brunette on screen. “I’ve already spoken to Central Command. There’s no one they can give us on such short notice who even comes close to resembling this one. Unfortunately.”

Trey silently read off the stats listed next to the image. Hair: Brown. Eyes: Green. Height: 5’2”. Weight: 120 pounds. 36-24-36. Shit. He knew someone who fit that description. He kept his mouth glued shut.

“What if Williams tells them his wife suddenly felt ill and couldn’t travel, sir? They’re newlyweds. He can say she’s pregnant or something,” BB suggested. BB had come to the team as Billy Bob, but the team had shortened that immediately.

The commander nodded. “That’s exactly what he’ll have to do, but only as a last resort. We want to cast as little suspicion on this as we can and make as few changes as possible to our guests’ original plans. The bastard husband has been bragging by email how smart he was bringing his wife with him to avoid suspicion. The target even commented how much he’s looking forward to meeting her. I’d rather have a woman there with him.”

“Um, sir? Would you consider a civilian?” Matt Coleman, the communications and computer specialist leaned forward in his chair.

The commander raised an eyebrow, considering. “I guess that depends on quite a few things. Why? Do you have someone in mind, Coleman?”

Matt nodded. “Call me crazy, sir, but you take that cute little bartender at the place just off base, throw some makeup and a little hair spray on her and you’d have the spitting image of that woman there on screen.”

The commander considered this for a moment. “Coleman, run her and make sure she’s not a member of some terrorist sleeper cell pretending to be a bartender. I want to know everything you can get and I want it now.”

“Yes, sir.” Matt Coleman, never without his laptop, opened the lid and began tapping keys immediately. At the same time, he whipped out his cell phone and started to quietly make phone calls.

Jack should have had Matt with him at the bar yesterday. He and his computer probably could have come up with Carly’s name on the spot. Her eye color too, knowing his skill.

“You know this girl, Williams?” The commander turned to him.

Trey’s heart had kicked into double time the moment Matt mentioned Carly. Shit. Had his reaction shown on his face? Or was the commander asking him only because he was the one going in undercover?

“Yes, sir. I do.”

“Would you like to elaborate a bit, Williams? Does she really look like this woman? Is she discreet? Is she intelligent? Basically, can she pull this thing off without getting you both killed and losing us Jimmy Gordon in the process?”

Trey swallowed hard and saw Jack watching him wide-eyed. He could lie and say she couldn’t pull this off, but he knew she could. Especially with his skills guiding her.

“Yes, sir.”

“Yes to which question, Williams?”

“Yes to all of them, sir. She’s perfect, or as perfect as we’re going to get from off base and within an hour.” He glanced at Jack, who looked like he wanted to kill him.

“Fine. Coleman, what have you got?”

Matt smiled. “You’re not going to believe this, sir. She’s ex-military. Went to college on the GI bill. Resigned, honorably, immediately after the death of her father, also military. After his death she took the insurance money and bought the bar just off base.”

The commander slapped his hands together. “Well, looky here. Something is actually going my way today. Coleman, send whatever information you’ve got to the printer in my office. Then, take as many men as you need and bring her in ASAP and by that I mean I want her here an hour ago. You got me?”

“Sir. Yes, sir.” Coleman and the others at the table sprung into action.

When Trey and Jack both stood also, the commander held up a hand to stop them. “You two both stay right where you are.”

They sat again, Jack looking extremely unhappy, Trey not feeling much better.

“I’ve got a few calls to make to clear this with the higher-ups. You, Gordon, will sit here and calm yourself down. The only way to help your brother is for you to keep a cool head, and if you can’t you’ll remain stateside. Williams, you wait here until your new wife arrives.” The commander left them and went into his private office just off the meeting room.

“What the hell, Trey? Why did you tell the commander she’d be perfect?”

He shook his head at Jack’s question. “I don’t know. He caught me off-guard. Besides, what was I supposed to do? Lie?”

“Yes. Taking her undercover to meet the target. Are you trying to get her killed?”

Trey closed his eyes and took a deep breath. “No, of course not. I have every intention of bringing us both home alive. And Jimmy too, if it comes to that.”

Jack shook his head. “You better.”

Blowing out a breath, Trey realized it was not going to be fun being trapped in a room to wait with Jack.

Trey was correct. They spent the next fifteen minutes in awkward silence until the rest of the team finally returned. He didn’t know how they’d done it, but they walked in with Carly in less than twenty minutes and boy oh boy, she didn’t seem happy about it.

She entered the meeting room looking pissed off and confused. When she saw him and Jack, she stopped dead, hands on her hips. “Maybe you two will tell me what the hell is going on since these guys wouldn’t say a thing when they dragged me out of my apartment at the crack of frigging dawn.”

Trey had seen the crack of dawn on many occasions and O-eight-forty did not qualify. She must have been out of the military for a long time. But running a bar made her schedule pretty much the opposite of his. He could appreciate her opinion of being yanked out of bed after his own long night babysitting a drunk Jack.

Speaking of Jack... He had jumped to his feet the moment Carly entered the room, but before he even had a chance to *hey, darlin’* her, the commander was at the door of his office. “Williams. Get in here and bring the girl with you. We have exactly fifty minutes before the plane is scheduled to leave.”

The commander strode to his desk. He sat and addressed Carly, “Shut the door behind you.”

Trey had to give Carly credit. Even though she looked pissed as hell, she silently followed him into the office and closed the door. Then she stood there with her arms crossed, waiting.

He watched the commander appraise her from head to toe. “Not bad.”

At that comment, Carly’s eyebrows shot up to her hairline. She opened her mouth to speak and Trey jumped in before she could.

“Sir, Ms. McAfee hasn’t been apprised of the situation as yet and is a bit confused.”

She didn’t look any happier he had spoken for her, but at least he stopped her from laying into the commander.

“Of course. Ms. McAfee, we’re requesting your help in a matter of national security. If you decide to help us, you’ll be told as little as possible, your life will be in danger and you can never tell anyone about what you’ve done, ever. In addition, you’ll have to make your decision within the next fifteen minutes and leave for your assignment immediately.”

She surprised Trey by laughing. “Well, since you make it sound so tempting and all...” She rolled her eyes and looked at Trey. Then she questioned him directly. “Am I necessary for the success of whatever this ‘assignment’ is?”

Trey considered his answer carefully. “Your presence will increase the chances of the success of this assignment. Yes.”

“Increase it by how much? From like ninety percent without me to one hundred percent with me?”

Trey glanced at the commander who answered for him. “More like sixty percent without you and seventy-five percent with you.”

They both watched her carefully as she took a deep breath. Trey knew, or at least hoped, the commander was giving her the worse-case scenario to make sure she was aware of what she was getting herself into and exactly how dangerous it would be because those odds pretty much sucked.

“Why me, specifically?” She directed her question at the commander.

“Honestly? Mostly because you look like her and we don’t have time to find anyone else.” The commander slid a print copy of the photo of the woman across his desk.

Carly walked closer, picked it up and studied it. After a moment she glanced up at Trey then back to the commander. “All right.”

The commander raised a brow. “That’s it? No more questions?”

Her short laugh sounded bitter. “Would you answer them if I asked?”

The commander smiled. “Probably not.”

“Then it would be a waste of time, now wouldn’t it?”

The commander nodded. “You’ll do well I think, McAfee. Williams will brief you on the flight over, but here’s a quick overview. You’re playing a newlywed American wife. Williams is your husband and as his wife you are devoted, loving and obedient and will do whatever he says.”

Carly screwed up her face, mumbling, “Good thing I took acting in college.”

The commander pretended he didn’t hear her, but continued a bit more loudly. “More importantly, he’s your field leader on this assignment and as such you’ll do whatever he commands, no questions asked. This is imperative. Hesitation could cost lives. He’ll be in constant contact with myself and any others who may be working with us. You have to trust him implicitly and without discussion, because you must assume every minute, everywhere, you will be monitored by those who can do you harm. I mean not even a whisper, McAfee. Do you understand?”

“Yes, sir.”

Trey noted she was already standing a little straighter and calling the commander “sir”. Military training was just like riding a bike. You never really forgot it.

“Good. You’re quick and you’re tough, McAfee. I can see that. You must be to deal with these guys drunk every night. I wouldn’t be sending you on this assignment if I didn’t think you would succeed. One last thing—” the commander turned to Trey, “—Williams, go kiss your new bride.”

It was a test. Trey knew that. A test both for himself and for Carly. Keeping his role in mind, he became the newlywed husband who was supplying arms to terrorist bastards.

Without hesitation, Trey strode to where she stood. More petite up close than she appeared when she was wielding her larger-than-life attitude while slinging beer behind her bar, in reality she came up only to about his chest.

He tangled one hand in her hair so she couldn't pull her head away, not that she tried. He slipped the other beneath the hem of the shirt where it just met the jeans riding low below her waist. Her skin felt warm and smooth to the touch. He slid his hand higher and let his thumb rest just below the lush curve of her breast.

Trey had to duck his head down to reach her. She stared up at him, her eyes liquid pools of green clearly showing her surprise as he bent and captured her mouth.

Kissing her hard and deep, he parted her lips and drove his tongue between them before he or she had too much time to think about it. In this particular situation thinking would be bad.

She didn't squirm or pull away. In fact, she actually tilted her head and allowed him greater access to the warm, wet recesses of her mouth. As his tongue met and stroked hers, he felt a stirring in his pants. There was no way to kiss a woman this attractive this deeply and not have it affect him. He was a healthy male after all, but he didn't need a raging hard-on in front of both Carly and the commander.

When he thought how he and Carly would be sharing a bed as they portrayed a married couple for the duration of this mission his mind went to bad places, and his erection followed. Trey quickly broke the kiss.

Trying to ignore both his pounding heart and his rapidly expanding lower appendage, he dropped his hands from her too-tempting body and turned to the commander. "Sir?"

The commander nodded and smiled. "Let's get you two on that plane."

He caught the brief look of shock on Carly's face. They'd have to work on that on the flight over. She couldn't show any surprise in front of the target. It could mean both their lives.

Trey followed the commander out of the office and into the meeting room, guiding a stunned Carly by the elbow until he saw Jack's gaze zero in on his hand holding Carly's arm. He dropped his hold immediately and found himself wiping his mouth and remembering that kiss.

Damn it, he would have to get a hold on himself. If he wanted to get them through this thing alive, he'd have to conquer both the chemistry he felt with Carly and the guilt he had over Jack.

The commander, unaware of the love triangle developing right beneath his nose, continued to brief the team. "Our happy couple here will be flying in a private jet courtesy of our targets' bank account." Trey inwardly cringed at the term "happy couple" and the look on Jack's face.

The commander continued. "The jet has been swept for surveillance and is clean, but count that as the last secure place until this thing is over. The rest of the team will be in a transport just ahead of them. We'll be connected by Williams's earpiece. Let's roll, wheels up at O-nine-thirty."

Trey whispered into Carly's ear. "Walk up ahead for a moment. I need to talk to Jack alone."

It was killing her already to follow his orders without question, he could tell, but she did as he asked. He counted her compliance as another step closer to insuring they'd make their flight home and not in a body bag either.

"Jack." Trey held him back a few paces. "I need to know you're okay before I get on that plane."

"No, I'm not okay, Trey. I'm pissed as hell. I'm going to be stuck on the sidelines instead of out there trying to help my brother. And to top it off, I have to watch my best friend play bridegroom to the woman I may very well be falling in love with. If he doesn't get her killed first."

Trey felt his eyes widen at that revelation. Jack had used the "L" word. He'd known Jack had a crush on Carly, but not that he was falling in love.

"This is just an assignment, Jack. It's all pretend." Yeah, right. Nothing *pretend* about his reaction to their kiss. It would also be very real that Carly's warm body would be sharing a bed with his in a hotel room in Kosovo. "You can pick up wherever you left off with her when I bring her back." Trey hated that thought.

"Just make sure you do bring her back." Then Jack surprised him when he reached out and hooked an arm around Trey's neck, pulling him into a quick hug. "Make sure to keep yourself safe and my brother too."

Trey needed no reminding of exactly how many lives he was carrying on his shoulders at the moment, but knowing Jack was still his friend helped ease the burden a bit. He slapped him on the back and they both ran to catch up with the group.

Chapter Five

Carly sat in the passenger seat of a rental car as Trey drove them to some private jet at the airport. The charade had already begun apparently. They drove in a separate car in case anyone was watching. She and Trey couldn't be seen piling out of the black van that carried his teammates and all their equipment. She drew some small satisfaction that her suspicions had been dead on. There was no doubt in her mind now that they were definitely black ops, right down to the color of their vehicle.

"I'm scheduled to be off tonight, but I have to call the bar and leave a message so they don't worry about me when I'm not there to open tomorrow."

He handed her a cell phone. "No details."

"I know. I'm not stupid." She added the last part under her breath but he turned to look at her as if he'd heard.

"Do you have your story ready?"

"Yes." Not really, but now that he'd said it she thought of an excuse for her unexplained absence pretty quickly. After dialing, she waited for the machine to pick up.

"Hey, guys. Something came up and I have to be out of town for a few days. I'm going to need you to juggle the schedule a bit and cover my shifts. Also, you have to place an order for liquor and beer today or we'll be in big trouble by the weekend. Just ask the distributor to help you put together the order and don't let him talk you into anything you don't think we need. I do not want that orange-flavored creamy tequila crap he keeps pushing on me and if I come home and find it there, I'm going to make whichever one of you ordered it drink every last ounce. I guess that's it. You won't be able to get in touch with me, but I'll call when—"

The machine cut her off. She hung up the phone and handed it to him.

Trey glanced at her. "Boy. I had no idea it was so complicated owning a bar. Then again, I had no idea you owned the bar until today or that you used to be in the service."

Carly sniffed. "One thing the military does well is pry into people's personal business."

So they knew about her time in the service. She hoped they also knew she spent the entire duration of it behind a desk stateside. Sure, she went through basic training and yeah, she could fire a weapon. If she had one, which she didn't so she wasn't at all convinced *that* skill was going to help in this situation. She could file papers for Trey if the need arose though.

He laid a hand on her knee. "I know you're pissed about being dragged into this, but get it all out now. Once we're off that plane you're no longer Carly McAfee and we can't discuss any of this, no matter what you're feeling."

Like she needed reminding he'd put his life into her hands. She decided as long as she had his permission to vent now and only now she might as well get it all out. "What the hell was with that kiss?"

He glanced at her and then focused on the road ahead. Did his brown eyes show guilt? Embarrassment? "You know as well as I that the commander was testing both of us."

"Testing what? How long it took for you to get your tongue down my throat?" She was angry, but more at herself than at him. She'd reacted to his kiss. She hated that thought.

She would like to think it was because of her self-imposed sexual dry spell. Last night she'd let Jack kiss her and almost gave in to his invitation for dinner, though he probably wouldn't remember. Today she'd been ready to crawl into Trey's pants.

Not only was she breaking all her own rules, it seemed to be getting progressively worse. As nice and sweet as Jack's kiss had been the night before, her body hadn't reacted as fiercely as it had to Trey's mind-blowing lip lock.

Damn it. She didn't want to be attracted to either of them. Not Jack or Trey. No, it was more than that. She would not allow herself to be attracted. Not since the love of her life had come home from his tour of duty overseas, married and with a baby. *Surprise*.

Now here she was pretending to be married to one of the few guys she'd been attracted to since then. A guy who, against all common sense, she was having trouble resisting and of course, he was eyeball deep in the military.

Trey glanced her direction again. "I'm sorry, but the reality is you and I are either convincingly happily married or dead. Under normal circumstances, my behavior in the commander's office would have been totally inappropriate, but there's nothing normal about this situation. You cannot react to anything I do once we're off that plane or—"

"I know. I know. I know."

"No, Carly. I'm afraid you don't. We may be under twenty-four-hour audio and visual surveillance even in our hotel room. We have to act married, day and night. No breaks. No downtime."

She whipped her head around to stare at his profile as he drove. "Are you saying I'm supposed to have sex with you?"

His throat worked as he swallowed. "It shouldn't come to that. Hopefully we'll be in and out quick...out of the mission I mean. One or two nights maximum."

"What if we're there longer?"

"We won't be."

"What if we are?"

“We’ll figure something out.”

Not liking the sound of that, nor the fact her insides had done a total flip at the thought of having sex with Trey, Carly crossed her arms over her chest and stared out the side window.

“Carly.”

“What?”

“We may have to get pretty intimate. I have to know you won’t react like this during the op if I have to touch you.”

“I’ll be fine.”

“Look at me.”

Finally, she turned away from the window to face him.

“Are you going to be okay with all of this?”

“Why don’t you have any faith in me?”

“I do have faith in you or I wouldn’t have said yes when the commander asked my opinion on your coming.”

“Then stop questioning me.”

“It’s a lot to deal with. You’re not trained for this. I need to know that if things get serious you’ll be okay.”

“Yes, damn it. Once we’re off that plane, I’ll be the perfect little obedient wife. Okay? But right now, can you please stop talking about this and leave me alone?”

Trey’s raised eyebrows were his only reaction to her hissy fit as he concentrated overly hard on the road ahead.

She drew in a deep steadying breath. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s fine. This is a lot to deal with all of a sudden.” His voice was kinder, gentler than it had been the entire car ride. He was probably afraid she’d totally break down and start to cry or something.

Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the well-built muscles flex in his arm as he spun the steering wheel and guided the car into the airport entrance. Those arms could very well be wrapped around her as they pretended to be married. She pictured them together as they tried to convince the cameras and microphones they were married. Need coiled within her and she became very aware of the lower parts of her body.

Trey had no idea how much she was trying to deal with right now.

Inside the airport, Trey placed a hand on the small of Carly’s stiffened back and guided her toward the terminal where the private jet waited. He took it as a good sign she didn’t slap his hand away after her meltdown in the car earlier.

As they waited in line to go through the metal detectors, he slid his hand up over her shirt. Gently cradling the back of her head in one hand, he leaned down and touched his lips to hers, watching her reaction closely. Her eyes drifted closed, opening again to stare into his when he ended the all-too-brief kiss.

She didn't slap him. That was good. Carly would have to get used to him casually touching her the way a husband would. Better to practice here than in front of the target. If she weren't able to handle this, he would much rather find out now instead of in front of the enemy.

He tried not to think about the fact he just plain liked kissing her. Jack had been right when he said she was a really good kisser. Trey's stomach clenched and he pushed thoughts of Jack and Carly out of his mind. This mission required one hundred percent of his concentration. He'd have to deal with any ramifications when they returned, and they would return if he had anything to say about it.

Carly was quiet. Too quiet and a little stiff.

"Everything all right?" He brushed a finger down her cheek.

Her answer was a far-from-convincing nod.

Reaching down, he took her hand and squeezed it. "You're doing great."

She swallowed before answering. "Thanks."

They breezed through the final security check with the couple's documents, expertly altered by Matt to include their own photos. The bastard had been right about airport security. Even with Carly's nerves apparent, the agents didn't look too hard at an all-American happily married couple traveling together.

Trey carried their bag, or rather the single piece of luggage belonging to the real couple they were impersonating, onto the aircraft. They'd have to change into the Smiths' clothes before landing and hope at least something fit well enough to be convincing. Otherwise they would have to wear their own clothes, but the less they deviated from the real couple's original plans and looks the better.

Matt and his magic computer had made sure the pilot was clean. He was actually also ex-military. Trey figured he and Carly were able to feel moderately safe on the flight while they memorized their fake histories.

As they waited for take-off, she sat in the seat next to him and read the file. She raised an eyebrow. "My name is Candi with an 'I' and I was a stripper before I married you? Oh, that's just lovely."

He laughed. "I can't wait to see what kind of wardrobe is waiting for you in that suitcase."

She scowled. "Just don't expect me to dance for you or anything."

"We'll see."

Carly smacked him on the leg at his little joke. He grinned, happy she was loosening up a bit. Her playful side was just as appealing as the rest of her. Pushing her appeal out of his mind, he tried to concentrate on his own file. He was having a lot of trouble doing so.

Since he was already thinking about her anyway, he figured he might as well put his arm around her. Strictly for practice, of course.

Without raising her eyes from her file, she commented on his action. "No one can see us here. We don't have to act married now, you know."

"Yes, we do. You still tense up every time I touch you. You have to stop."

Now she did look at him, but not in a nice way. Her brows knit above her gorgeous eyes. "I do not tense up."

He laughed. "Yeah, you do. It's slight, but I feel it."

She rolled her eyes. "Well, if it's so slight no one else is going to notice."

"We can't take a chance." He sobered at that reminder.

Serious now too, she nodded. "I know."

"Good." He didn't say what he was thinking, that *knowing* and *doing* were two different things. Then he decided to push her a little further, strictly for the sake of the mission, of course. "Kiss me."

With a slight look of surprise, but without hesitation, she leaned in and brushed her lips across his gently. Then she pulled away. "Ha. That was another test. You thought I would fail, didn't you?" With a humph, she returned to her paperwork, looking very satisfied with herself.

Trey felt like an absolute shit, not to mention a rotten friend, a pitiful soldier and not all that great of a man right now, but he couldn't help himself. He reached out and turned her face toward him again. "I mean *really* kiss me."

He saw the battle in her eyes. She swallowed hard and dropped her gaze to his lips before closing the distance between them. Then her parted lips were on his and her hand was in his hair. Acting the aggressor, Carly took control and her tongue met his.

His chest tightened and he had to control the groan building inside him. Trey couldn't stop himself, didn't want to, when his hand brushed the side of her breast and settled there. He heard her sharp intake of breath as she kissed him harder.

Then she pulled away, breathless, her eyelids heavy. "This is just for this assignment, nothing more."

It was definitely not a question, more of a statement, a demand really. Why? Not that he should care. He did not want or need a girlfriend, he reminded himself.

Why was she making rules? Maybe she was falling for Jack. If so, he should be happy for his friend. It cut him to the bone he wasn't, not even close.

"Of course." He nodded in response. "Just for the mission." Then he leaned against the seatback and continued studying the file until he thought his eyes might burn a hole in the page.

He was concentrating so hard on ignoring Carly the sound of Matt's voice coming through his earpiece startled the hell out of him. He literally jumped in his seat and not surprisingly, Carly noticed.

"What's wrong?" She sat forward, frowning.

“Nothing. Go ahead, Matt.”

“Just testing it out there, big boy. So, how was that kiss?” Matt’s smart ass comment did nothing for his mood and just served to remind him they were indeed under constant surveillance, if not by the bad guys, definitely by the good guys. He’d been hoping Matt and his magic laptop wouldn’t have communications up and running while they were in the transport, but he was wrong.

“Um, hello?” Matt’s singsong voice made the word into three syllables rather than two.

“I hear you just fine. This concludes this test.” Not only did Trey not want to talk to Matt right now, but he also had to explain what was happening to Carly. She was looking at him like he had lost his mind and was talking to himself.

“Right, you need to get back to that very important part of your mission, I suppose. Can’t wait until I have video up and running.” He could almost hear Matt smirking. Shit. This was getting more complicated by the minute.

He turned to Carly and pointed at his ear. “Communications earpiece.”

She appeared impressed. “I didn’t even see it. Wow, it must be really small.”

Almost in his lap now, she tried to peer into his ear. She was so close he felt her breath against his skin. An uncontrollable shiver ran down his spine before he could shake it off. Grabbing her by both shoulders, he placed her firmly back in her seat.

“You can’t see it because a doctor implanted it inside my ear canal. It’s less likely to be detected during undercover ops and if it is, it looks like a cochlear implant.”

Now she looked especially impressed. Perhaps he should talk about more tech stuff. She seemed to like it. She’d be really in awe when the time came for them to dispose of their files and she saw the patented dissolvable paper disintegrate in the water in the jet’s bathroom sink.

“Wow.” Her gaze dropped briefly before returning to his face. “What else have you got hidden inside you?”

He laughed. “Wouldn’t you like to know?”

Trey wasn’t about to tell her he also had a tracking device as well as an encoded identification chip hidden inside him, and who knew what else. It seemed the medical personnel were always jabbing him with something or another during those physical exams every six months.

“Hmm. I’ve underestimated Uncle Sam. Speaking of the good old US of A and our beloved Department of Homeland Security, what can you tell me about our ‘assignment’?”

“Nothing. Read your dossier. There’s going to be a test before we land.” He wasn’t really worried she couldn’t remember the facts of their new fake lives. At the bar he’d seen her memorize a list of drinks a mile long while dodging Jack’s advances at the same time, but there was no way he could respond to her question. Best to keep her busy so she wouldn’t sulk, which he was sure she would do anyway because he wouldn’t give in to her.

As if on cue, she screwed up her face in another adorable pout and he found he had to read the same page over again for the third time.

Chapter Six

Carly walked down the much-too-narrow metal stairs of the jet and clutched the railing for dear life. She could kill Trey. She knew he was walking just behind her, watching her ass in the tight black low-rise leather pants as she tried to walk in the stripper's four-inch heels that were a size too big.

"You're a dancer, remember? Try to be a little more graceful," he whispered behind her.

She shot him a killer look over her shoulder. "We're off the plane, remember? No more talking."

He was trying hard not to laugh at her and she was trying harder not to whack him with the stripper's giant leather purse full of the makeup and hairspray he'd made her put on. She looked like a clown, or worse, the cocktail waitress at work. "Ooo. I hate you right now." Her stomach roiled with frustration.

He made a mock hurt face. "But, sweetheart, I love you so."

Turning away from him, she focused all of her concentration on the downward descent, hoping this assignment would get better, which wasn't very likely.

Finally reaching the bottom of the stairs and the solid ground of the tarmac, she found it a bit easier to maneuver in the heels. She hated to admit it, but Trey was right. She'd have to learn damn quickly how to walk more naturally in these death-trap stilts or she'd blow it for both of them. How the hell did strippers dance in these things?

Next to her again, Trey draped one arm casually around her shoulders as he pulled the suitcase on wheels behind him. *His* clothes were just fine. He got to wear a black silk shirt and fitted gray trousers that made his ass look incredible. She nearly had to shake her head to clear the image of his cute butt from her brain.

This was her own fault. If she hadn't sworn off men, perhaps she wouldn't be finding Trey so irresistibly attractive.

Glancing up, she caught him looking down her cleavage, which was huge and totally exposed thanks to the stripper's taste in tiny tops. Sure, Carly wore the occasional tight T-shirt at the bar. It increased her tips by a laughably large amount, but she never wore anything as revealing as this. Worse, this was actually the shirt with the most coverage among what she had found in the suitcase. All the others exposed her belly button as well as her boobs.

Carly huffed out a breath. She couldn't even reprimand Trey for looking down her shirt. Playing his happy and horny bride, she should enjoy this kind of lascivious attention. Actually, on the plane during that

kiss she had gotten the horny role down pretty well. She buried the thought quickly. Too bad the ache inside her wasn't as easy to dismiss.

How was she ever supposed to go back to casually serving this guy beer at the bar when she'd never forget the feel of his hand on her breast? She should have just said no to this thing. Then the commander's words echoed in her head. *Sixty percent chance of success without you.* She couldn't have backed out and doomed Trey to a forty percent chance of failure, possibly death, because she couldn't control her overactive libido around him.

She tried not to dwell on the fact the commander had estimated there was still a twenty-five percent chance of failure even with her there. If she didn't keep her mind on the task that number would probably get even worse.

With all this introspective thought, she'd missed what Trey had just said. She forced herself to focus. "I'm sorry. What?"

"There's the limo the email said would be waiting for us." He was staring in the direction of a long black car whose driver was leaning against the hood.

Her heart kicked into double time. *Here we go. Don't screw it up.*

The driver walked forward to greet them, taking the bag from Trey. "Mr. Smith, Mrs. Smith. I hope you had a pleasant flight."

The names of the people they were impersonating sounded even more stupid and fake when the driver said them. Carly would bet a year's tips they *were* fake.

The driver continued, "Welcome to Kosovo."

Kosovo? Wow. That explained why the flight was so long and why it looked like it was already the middle of the night here. She tried to remember anything she'd seen or read recently about this particular hotbed of discontent. If she ever got out of here alive, she swore she would pay more attention to current events.

She spotted the bulge of a concealed weapon under the driver's suit jacket. It nearly stopped her dead in her tracks. Only sheer force of will coupled with Trey's gentle nudge kept her teetering onward.

Undercover in Kosovo. When she chose to do something crazy, she sure did it in a big way.

Boy, did he love the way those high heels made Carly's hips sway. If only he could devote his attention to just watching her walk. Instead, he pretended to watch her as he evaluated their surroundings. He checked the rooftop for snipers. It looked clear. He memorized the limo's license plate number to give to Matt later so he could find out who it was registered to.

Of course, he'd noticed right away the driver's concealed weapon as well as his extremely expensive suit. Trey would bet his pension this was no mere driver, but rather part of the target's most trusted inner

circle sent to make sure nothing went wrong. This meet was too important to trust any portion of it to lower-level hired help.

Trey kept his arm around Carly after they got into the backseat of the car and played with her now larger-than-life hair-sprayed hair. Anything to keep her mind off the driver's weapon, which had nearly toppled her off her heels when she'd noticed it. Carly sat so close they were pressed together from hip to thigh. She was definitely scared.

They drove the distance from the airport to the capital city of Pristina and pulled up in front of the prestigious Hotel Pristina. Had he been in the dark, he would have thought the target had spared no expense by putting them up in the best hotel in the city. However, thanks to the intelligence gathered by Jack's brother Jimmy, he knew better. A corporation set up by the target happened to own this hotel. Just one more way the bad guys had figured out how to filter and hide money.

The clerk greeted them in the language of the country, which Trey, as John Smith, had to pretend not to understand. He responded a bit too loudly in his native tongue, as people tended to do when conversing with those who didn't speak their language. "We're American. Do you speak English?"

"Of course." The clerk nodded. "Please, your name?"

"Smith. John and Candi Smith." Trey smiled down at Carly when he said it, knowing she hated her fake name and it would drive her crazy. He nearly laughed as he watched her bite her lip but not say a word. Laying his hand on her shoulder, he felt her trembling and pulled her closer to his side.

The front desk clerk consulted a computer. "Yes, I have you here. You have bags?"

"Just one suitcase. It's still in the trunk of the car." No doubt where their host had already had it thoroughly searched. Trey had purposely kept the laptop bag with him the entire time, just as John Smith would have.

The clerk signaled a bellman to retrieve the luggage from the car. He led them up in the elevator to one of the higher floors. In this case, higher was not better. It only meant they'd have more flights to descend if they needed to get the hell out of there quickly. It also meant escape through the window was not an option.

A chilled bottle of champagne and overflowing fruit basket awaited them inside an impressively large room. Trey glanced around and quelled his frustration. There was nothing he could do there until Matt set up shop somewhere nearby, hacked into the hotel's security systems and determined whether there was surveillance set up in the room or not.

His instinct told him there would be, but until he knew for sure he was at loose ends waiting on Matt. Trey took another look around the well-appointed room. He'd been on way worse assignments than this. He really couldn't complain. Acting like John Smith, he grabbed the icy cold bottle from the bucket and popped the cork, sure his wife could use a little something to calm her down. Not enough to get her drunk, just a bit to stop her from shaking.

Carly's eyes opened wide, silently reprimanding him for drinking on the job, he supposed.

"Look, how nice. We can't ignore our host's generous hospitality. Right, baby?"

What was he supposed to do? Judging by what he had learned thus far about John and Candi Smith, they were the type to pop the cork, so to speak. He pushed a nasty thought from his mind at his own little accidental sexual euphemism. He briefly pictured doing *that* with Carly instead of drinking.

He poured them both a glass, then walked to Carly and handed one to her. He clinked his champagne flute to hers. "Here's to my beautiful wife."

Watching a blush creep into her cheeks, he let the expensive bubbly slide down his throat. She was so easy to rattle. It would be fun if their lives weren't on the line. He'd have to get her comfortable with him before the meet tomorrow. If he didn't, someone was bound to notice. Leaving her behind in the hotel room when he went alone was not an option. If the shit hit the fan he wanted Carly with him. It was his only chance at protecting her.

He was just trying to think of some way to put her at ease when Matt's voice sounded in his ear. "They've got both eyes and ears, Trey. Sophisticated and extremely sensitive shit. You copy me?"

He covered his mouth and coughed once to indicate to Matt he had indeed heard his less-than-encouraging news. Eyes and ears. Both video and audio surveillance. Just great. God willing, Carly would remember what the commander had told her during their very brief meeting in his office that morning. *Not even a whisper.*

"You hungry, sweetheart?" When Carly's look told him the last thing she wanted to do was eat, he looped an arm around her neck and planted a big kiss on her champagne-scented lips. "I know the time change is messing with your system but you should eat at least something light."

"Okay." She stared up at him, as if waiting for him to tell her what to do next.

"Why don't you order something for both of us from room service? There should be a menu in here somewhere."

She nodded but didn't move.

He had to knock her out of this deer-in-headlights mode. "I'm going to hop into the shower quick while you order." Grabbing her shoulders, he lowered his head nearer her ear. "Unless you'd like to join me."

That jolted her out of her sudden stage fright.

"Actually, I'm starving." Pulling away, she walked to the desk. She grabbed the room service menu lying there.

If this were any other situation, he would definitely take advantage of how easy it was to ruffle her feathers and enjoy doing it. Pulling his shirt off over his head while walking toward the bathroom, Trey couldn't help but smile.

Carly tried to peruse the room service menu but it wasn't until Trey and his well-developed and now shirtless muscles were safely locked away in the bathroom that she actually noticed she couldn't read it. It must be in Serbian, or Slovakian, or whatever the hell the language was here. Out of pure frustration, she flipped the menu over and found the English translation provided for tourists.

American tourists. In Kosovo. That was laughable. Given all the vacation destinations in the world, why would anyone choose Kosovo? Maybe businessmen stayed here, though she didn't know what industry Kosovo was famous for. She glanced at the offerings, which only raised another question. What did one eat while in Kosovo?

She automatically ruled out fish and even meat. Perhaps she was being a typical ethnocentric American, but she wasn't sure what the sanitation was like here. The last thing she needed was E. coli or something. The ridiculousness of worrying about food poisoning when most likely they'd both end up shot to death by the gun-wielding limo driver was not lost on her.

Pushing that thought out of her mind, she finally settled on salad and pizza, although pizza in a foreign country was probably more risky than the fish. Hopefully they imported it frozen from the States.

Armed with that illogical belief, she placed the order with an accommodating phone operator who, thank goodness, spoke at least some English. That done, she began rifling through the one suitcase again. Might as well dig deeper and see what other surprises were in there. She didn't even want to think about what kind of lingerie Candi the former stripper wore.

What she discovered was an embarrassingly small see-through thing she supposed could laughably be called a nightgown in some circles. She was standing with the item in question dangling from one fingertip, wondering how she was ever going to put this on and sleep when the bathroom door opened.

The nightie was forgotten immediately when Trey emerged, dressed in nothing but a towel draped low on his hips. Her eyes followed the trail of damp hair that led from his chest, down his belly, directly toward his... She swallowed hard.

He walked to the suitcase and picked through the choices left in the bag. He stood so close she could smell the hotel soap and shampoo on him.

Trey raised a brow when he noticed what she still held, forgotten, in her hand. "Dressing for bed?" He smiled broadly and grabbed a pair of black silk pajama bottoms out of the jumble of clothes. "Good idea."

Without any hesitation, he dropped the towel, leaving a lot more than just his torso exposed this time. As he pulled on the pants she got quite a view before she forced her gaze away.

She rushed to speak and cover for the shock his sudden and total nakedness had caused. "Um, I think I'll wait a bit and get changed after I eat."

Just in time, a knock on the door announced the room service delivery.

Trey, only half-naked now, moved swiftly but cautiously to the door. Carly could finally breathe again once he was all the way across the room and not totally nude. She had never welcomed the arrival of a pizza delivery so warmly in her entire life.

Trey and his bulging pecs returned to her rolling the room service cart. “You ordered pizza? Wasn’t there filet mignon or lobster on the menu? *We’re* not paying for this, you know. We’re guests.”

“What can I say? I’m a simple girl.” Carly shrugged, grabbed a slice and shoved it into her mouth so she didn’t continue to stare at Trey’s still-bare chest. “Don’t you think you better put on a shirt?”

He raised a brow. “Why?”

“I just wouldn’t want you to get hot cheese on your chest and burn yourself or something.” Yeah, sure. That was the reason.

Trey grinned. “Thank you, sweetheart, for worrying about me.” He grabbed himself a slice and carefully held a napkin under it while he bit the end off.

When he still showed no sign of covering up, Carly bit viciously into her own slice again. It was going to be a very long night.

Chapter Seven

It was going to be a very long night.

Trey lay in the bed next to Carly who was dressed in a scrap of lace that didn't even pretend to cover her. She was currently rolled on her side, facing away from him and pretending to be asleep. Or maybe she had managed to fall asleep from sheer exhaustion. Sighing, he wished he could do the same.

This waiting was killing him. Not that he could do much with the team while undercover as John Smith, but hearing at least whether Jimmy had been located would help. He needed some military action on this op to keep his mind from thinking about another kind of action with Carly. This "sit around and wait" was unbearable. He listened to Carly breathing next to him.

Unbearable.

Although he had to admit things had gone extremely well so far. She hadn't broken character, not even when he'd dropped his towel and changed in front of her. She looked a little shocked, yeah, but he hoped no one would notice that but him. Certainly not a security guard bored to tears watching them on a tiny black and white monitor in a windowless room somewhere.

There had been one moment he feared she would give them away. He had walked into the bathroom to find her scrubbing the stripper's toothbrush with hot soapy water. Obviously, she didn't want the used apparatus in her mouth, not that he could blame her. He hadn't even considered dental hygiene when they assumed possession of the Smith's lives and luggage.

Jeez, he'd been on ops where he didn't even see a toothbrush for a week, much less running water, but women were different, he guessed.

Unsure about what to do about her obsessive brush-washing, which was too obvious to ignore, he'd questioned her about it. "What are you doing, sweetheart?"

He had to hand it to her. She covered for herself well. "Some makeup got on my toothbrush in my bag, so I had to wash it. I don't know if you've ever tasted makeup before, but I don't recommend it."

She'd done well and he had been free to return to the other room to worry about the next problem. How in the world was he going to avoid having sex with her while still acting like a newly married couple for their observers?

He was still considering this when she came out of the bathroom and headed for the suitcase, avoiding eye contact with him the entire way. He got up and went into the bathroom to brush his own teeth...with

John Smith's toothbrush. He tried not to think about that fact, but since she had already raised the issue in his mind, he used extra hot water to rinse it first.

By the time he emerged from the bathroom, Carly had already changed into the nightie and was curled on her side and pretending to be sound asleep. Thank God. She was either really on the ball or just desperate to avoid any more physical contact with him.

Either way, it was the perfect solution to his dilemma. It would simply look like she was tired from traveling and he being the understanding husband would let her sleep. As long as they were here for only the one night as planned, he could definitely get away with it. It would look realistic, he hoped.

He'd never been married, but judging by what the guys with wives said, sex got less and less frequent the moment they said I do. Although, glancing at the curve of Carly's body, he couldn't imagine not jumping her every night of the week if they were together, married or not.

Trey sighed again. There was far too much down time, leaving him ample opportunity to think about the one thing he needed to avoid. Sex.

Punching his pillow, he repositioned himself. What the hell good was the communication device implanted in his damn head if he couldn't even ask them a question without being detected by the bad guy's surveillance? He'd never felt so cut off from the team in all his time with them.

It was with that very disgruntled thought in his mind he started to drift off.

"Trey. Hey, Williams. Wake up."

Trey controlled the urge to sit straight up in the bed as the voice in his ear startled him out of that restless place between being awake and asleep. He had wanted to know what was going on with the team. *Be careful what you wish for.*

Clearing his throat softly, he let Matt know he was awake and receiving.

"We've got action here, big boy. We found Jimmy. The target has him confined in some sort of holding area right here in the basement of the hotel." Matt's voice radiated excitement.

Trey's heart rate doubled knowing the action was so close to him. Right here in the hotel.

"The bad news is they've worked him over pretty badly and we don't think they're done yet. We've got to get him out, but the area's swarming with the target's men."

His heart fell at that news. Jack must be freaking out and there was not one damn thing Trey could do to help in his present situation.

"We need your help, buddy," Matt continued.

Or maybe there was something he could do. Trey waited for Matt to explain and give him his orders. He only wished Carly wasn't involved. He'd kill or die to save Jimmy for Jack, but he wasn't willing to risk Carly's life in the process. She was a civilian under his care. Her safety was his priority at the moment, even over the success of the mission.

“Here’s the deal, Trey. They have the surveillance room set up next to where Jimmy is being held. The guards have been sitting around watching the video feed from your room since you arrived. They’ve taken a liking to your bride. They particularly enjoyed when she changed into that thing she’s wearing to sleep in. Even the guy sitting inside watching Jimmy got called in to watch her put that on.”

His jaw clenched at that news.

“Trey, I need a diversion and I need it now. We’re in place to sneak in through the rear and take Jimmy out, but we need every guard in the area glued to the monitor of your room.”

Trey tried to control his breathing when Matt said what he was afraid he would say. “You’ve got to use Carly as a distraction, Trey. It’s the only way. Do you copy?”

He cleared his throat again. Oh boy. Just when he was all smug thinking they’d get away from this op fairly unscathed. He knew what kind of diversion would keep the guards riveted to the screen. What he didn’t know was how Carly would like it.

The different scenarios ran through his mind. It could go a number of ways. He could make a move on Carly and she could break character. Slap him or yell or something. With their cover blown, they would have to use all the firepower they had to grab Jimmy and get the hell out of Dodge.

Or Carly could actually go through with this thing. In that case, he’d have to deal with the fact he’d had sex with the girl his best friend thought he might be falling in love with later. Trey would have to find both a new best friend and a different place to drink when he got home to base. Neither scenario was very appealing.

Then there was the reality nagging his brain and parts lower that he was trying like hell to suppress. The truth was he wanted nothing more than to be with Carly right now. The idea of giving into the sexual attraction and sinking into her was extremely appealing. Consequences be damned.

He didn’t want a girlfriend, he reminded himself again for the umpteenth time, but damn it, he wanted Carly. Apparently he didn’t care how he got her and that made him feel even shittier. Worse, the fact his teammate plus a room full of terrorists would be watching them together didn’t even put a damper on his desire. In fact, it made it all the more exciting. That reaction scared him half to death.

Now was not the time to over-think his sudden desire for exhibitionism. Jimmy was possibly being tortured while he delayed.

Trey had left the bathroom light on with the door ajar so he could see, but he’d need more illumination for his audience’s sake. He reached out into the semi-darkness until his hand found the light switch. After turning on the bedside lamp, he rolled toward Carly. The nightie was cut very low in the back. Actually, in the front too, but he couldn’t see that in her current position. Trailing a finger lightly down her exposed spine, he felt the shiver run through her.

Leaning closer, he dipped his tongue into the whorls of her ear. His hand slid down under the sheet and along the lace to her thigh where he started the return trip upward. Pressing against her back with his

bare chest, he could feel her start to tremble. He could only hope it was from the anticipation of wanting him and not fear.

The pulse thundered in her neck against his lips. Nearing the point of no return, he could either let her continue to pretend to be asleep and let Jimmy be tortured to death or he could roll her over and give the terrorists a show they would remember for the rest of their miserable lives, however short they may be.

He'd already made the decision about what needed to be done, but Matt's voice in his ear reinforced it. "They're taking the bait, man. They even got up to refill their coffee mugs and make microwave popcorn. They're fighting over front row seats and settling in for the show like it's a damn movie. We're in place, Trey. You keep them entertained and Jimmy will be on a transport to the military hospital in Germany tonight."

That settled it. There was no more internal debating to be done. Trey rolled Carly over and covered the surprise on her face by pressing his lips to hers. She responded well to his kisses. They'd practiced this. He dared to say they were damn good at it. It was her reaction to the rest he was worried about.

Damn it. Truth be told, he was just as worried about his own reaction to it. If he sank himself into this woman he was not going to forget it easily. Trey reminded himself he was a professional. He was supposed to be able to do things like this without any emotional ramifications. They'd all been through psychological training for situations exactly like this one.

They'd been through the prep, but Carly hadn't. What the hell would this do to her if they had to go through with it and actually have sex? She was an adult and a bar owner, but this was not some drunken one-night stand she chose to have. He wasn't giving her a choice at all. She knew to make a scene could cost them both of their lives.

More importantly, what if she did start dating Jack when they got home? How would Jack feel about the fact his teammate had enjoyed the pleasure of being with his girl before him?

Now was not the time to think about any of that. Matt has issued an order. Trey knew the situation and it was in his and Carly's power to help the team get Jimmy out of trouble.

Throwing the covers completely off them, he hoped the sight of Carly in her nightgown would be enough of a distraction to keep the guards' attention off Jimmy.

As he ran his hand over the fabric again, traversing a path from the curve of her waist down to the hem at her thighs, her eyes opened again.

"Mmm." He pressed his mouth against her ear. Knowing the sensitive audio surveillance Matt had told him about would pick up his words, he spoke like John Smith, hoping Carly understood the underlying message. "I was going to try and let you sleep, but I can't keep my hands off you. I'm sorry."

Shifting her so she lay on her back and he could see the dark traces of her nipples through the sheer fabric, he truly was sorry, but this was necessary. The guilt would be considerably less if he hadn't already gotten aroused from simply thinking about what they may have to do.

His hand reversed direction and started a path up her thigh, pushing the short nightie up her legs until the matching panties she wore were exposed. Carly's breath caught in her throat. Dare he pull those panties off her? What the hell would she do if he did?

Putting that next move off for a bit until he could gauge her potential reaction, Trey rolled on top of her, hoping the camera wouldn't pick up the nervousness apparent on her face. Settled between her legs, trying to ignore the erection she no doubt felt pressing against her, he weighed the options.

Could he fake making love to her? Maybe pull the sheet over them and feign the motions? Would Carly get it and go along with the charade? More importantly, would some movement hidden beneath the covers be enough to capture and hold the guards' interest enough for the team to extract Jimmy? Probably not. Then a stroke of brilliance hit him.

"Hey, baby. Get up and strip for me the way you used to."

Her eyes opened wide and he feared she might slap him. He remembered their conversation on the plane when he teased her.

Just don't expect me to dance for you.

We'll see.

That's what he got for joking around on an op as important as this one. He opened his eyes wider and shook his head slightly. Hopefully his movement wasn't noticeable enough for the terrorists to pick up on it.

"Don't look so mad, sweetheart. I know you gave that life up when we got married, but it turns me on. I really need you to do it for me right now. Okay?"

He could see by the expression on her face she was confused as hell by his request, but had remembered the surveillance and knew she couldn't question him. The muscles in her throat worked as she swallowed hard. "Okay, baby. Anything for you. I just don't know how good I'll be. You know, without my costumes and music and all."

She was nervous and a horrible actress under pressure, but he had to believe the guards watching them wouldn't notice once they got a good look at her body in motion.

"The camera is behind the mirror." Matt's voice in his ear reminded him again just how public this whole situation was. So why was he rock hard at the thought of it?

Trey got out of bed and, ignoring the tent in his pajamas, walked to where Carly had abandoned the high heels earlier. He picked them up and carried them to where she still lay. Extending a hand, he took hers and pulled her upright. While she sat on the edge of the mattress he kneeled. Taking one delicate foot in his hand, he drew it toward his mouth and kissed the arch of her instep. She trembled as he slid one shoe on.

Turning his attention to the other foot, he kissed his way from her ankle to her big toe, before drawing it into his mouth and sucking on it. Carly drew in a deep breath. If her toes were this sensitive, what the hell

would her reaction be if he sucked on a more intimate part of her? That thought had him beginning to tremble as all his psychological training flew right out the window.

Training. Bullshit. What military genius had thought any red-blooded man could make love to an attractive woman and not be affected in some way by it?

Thrusting the thought out of his mind, he moved this public seduction along and slipped the second shoe on. Then he leaned over to hit the power button on the television. The channel that automatically came on played music to accompany the hotel information written on the screen. He'd discovered that earlier while eating his pizza.

As the soft generic music filled the room, he pulled a chair over to the end of the bed and then motioned Carly over with the crook of one finger. "Come here, baby."

She rose from the bed and teetered over in the heels. He couldn't help thinking how great they made her legs look.

Standing her in front of the mirror, he sat in the chair. "There, sweetheart. Dance right there in front of the mirror for me."

She looked a bit frightened, but Trey figured since she was facing him and not the camera, it didn't matter. Hating he'd put her in such an uncomfortable situation, he felt even worse as he watched her hips start to sway. His body's reaction was clearly visible to both of them.

Her eyes dropped to the erection evident in the too-damn-thin silk pajama bottoms. Instead of it freaking her out, she reacted in the totally opposite way. She lifted her chin a bit, closed her eyes and started to really dance for him.

Turning in time to the rhythm of the music, she spun to face the mirror. Her eyes opened and their gazes met as she watched his reaction in the reflection.

Running her hands over her body, she danced. He alternated between focusing on her reflection in the mirror and the swaying of her hips right in front of him. All the while his erection was an ever-present sign of his enjoyment of the show. He was happy simply watching her, until she pulled down the top of the nightgown to reveal one breast to him, then wet her finger and circled her own nipple with it.

At that point, he was no longer simply an observer. He couldn't control himself. This was no longer just a show for the target. Hell, it hadn't been for some time. He pushed down his waistband and began to rub his swollen cock. Not that he had many brain cells functioning at this point, but his thinking was Smith would definitely be the kind of guy who would jerk off as his wife stripped for him. Second, perhaps if he came while watching her, he could get away with only making Carly strip for the terrorists and not have to go further.

Only making her strip. Ha! There was nothing insignificant about what was happening between them now. Especially not when her eyes caught the reflection of what was happening behind her. Knowing she

was watching him, as well as the target's guards and Matt in the control center, didn't diminish his arousal at all as pre-come seeped from the tip.

His fist moved faster over the rock-hard flesh and, just when he was starting to get really friendly with his own hand, Carly turned to him. Her gaze dropped, observing every motion he made. His heart pounded faster as she moved closer. Leaning down, she braced herself on each arm of the chair, putting him eye-level with her glorious tits. When she reached out and ran the tip of her finger down the slit of his cock, Trey hissed in a breath.

Her eyes met his and he saw the need in them. If she was into this, he sure as hell was too. Stopping what he had previously been doing, he released the grip on his cock and reached for her. With one finger he pulled aside the neckline of the already revealing nightie, just enough to expose her other nipple. Leaning forward, he drew the peak into his mouth and scraped his teeth against it. She drew in a sharp breath and then grabbed his head and pulled it closer to her breast.

There was no doubt in his mind now. John Smith was definitely going to make love to his wife tonight. Since it was too late to step back from the precipice on which they both teetered, he drew her another step forward. Wrapping his hands around her hips, he pulled her closer until she was in his lap, straddling him. Then she began to grind her pelvis against his erection.

She lowered her lips to his, devouring his mouth as he kissed her with equal need. His tongue drove against hers in a rhythm that mimicked what he hoped his very prominent arousal would soon do to her. She rubbed herself against the bulge of his cock. He heard her breath coming in staggered pants. In another second, she'd probably come just from the contact. If he didn't watch out, he'd come from it too.

Trey broke away. If this was to be the one and only time they'd be together, he wanted it to last a very long time and he intended on enjoying every moment. Besides, some part of his brain remembered the team wouldn't benefit from his rushing to finish this. They needed as much time as he could give them.

"Turn around. Face the mirror."

Did the pulse in her throat pound faster just from his suggestion? How hot was that?

"This is supposed to be a dance for you, remember?" Her voice sounded breathy.

"No reason why we can't both enjoy it." His own voice came out sounding raspy. This was no simple hook up. They affected each other physically. Chemically. He couldn't let himself think like that. This was a one-shot deal.

Swallowing hard from his words, Carly nodded. As her pulse continued to throb wildly, she rose and let him turn her toward the mirror.

"Spread your legs for me, baby. I want to see you." He sat her in his lap, his hands spreading her thighs wide. Easing aside the scrap of lace that comprised the bottom of Candi Smith's nightwear, he exposed her before both of their eyes. "Look at yourself, baby. You're so beautiful."

Head thrown back against his chest, she stared at her reflection as his hands slipped between her folds. He started circling his finger over her engorged clit. The first touch had her drawing in a sharp breath.

He scraped his teeth against her earlobe before moving down to nip lightly at her neck. Sliding a finger from his left hand inside, he stroked in and out of her while still working her clit with his right. She began to tremble. It wouldn't be long.

Moving her slightly, he readjusted their positions. He freed his erection from the pants, then slid it between her thighs. She rotated her hips against him, and with every movement his arousal rubbed her wet entrance while his fingers played against her.

Trey watched Carly in the mirror as she sat, shaking, facing away from him, her eyes squeezed closed. Her breathing got faster and then she was crying out and all but bucking out of his lap. He wrapped an arm around her waist and held her closer, but he didn't let up with his fingers as her orgasm rocked her.

Finally, it was obvious she couldn't take anymore. Panting and slumping weakly in his lap as her body jerked sporadically, she grabbed his hand to stop him.

Enjoying the view of her flushed face in the mirror, he held her as she caught her breath, all the while thinking she better not be done now because he sure as hell wasn't. That thought was reinforced by Matt's voice in his ear. "For God's sake, Trey. You can't stop now. We've almost got Jimmy out, but we need more time."

Trey closed his eyes for a second, regrouping in his mind. He had become Trey again while touching Carly, but he needed to be John Smith. Grasping her chin, he angled her face toward his, and then took control of her mouth in a hard, crushing kiss. He unleashed an untamed part of him he rarely gave into, thrusting his tongue into her mouth while he worked her breast roughly with one hand.

When he broke the kiss that had them both breathless, she opened her eyes again. He stared into the sea of green.

"I want to fuck you." Purposely choosing those coarse words, he played the role and let John Smith shine through him. It might be the only way to hold onto his own sanity.

She swallowed hard but remained silent.

"Do you want that?" His gut twisted waiting to hear the words from her lips. Finally, he was rewarded.

"Yes."

With two hands around her waist, Trey raised Carly off his lap and set her on her feet before him. He stood too and ran his hands up from her thighs, pulling her nightgown up and over her head. She was there before him, naked except for black lace thong underwear and heels. God, her breasts were beautiful. He'd really enjoy them in any other situation. Damn it, he was enjoying them now.

He pushed the chair out of the way and led Carly to the end of the bed, trying to reason away the fact he was trembling now too. Adrenaline. That's all it was.

Sinking into her was going to be a huge mistake. He knew it. Yet he was going to do it anyway for so many reasons, half of them selfish, half not so selfish. This was for Jimmy, at least partially. He had to keep reminding himself of that, even though he didn't believe one word of his own internal lies.

With both of them still standing, he turned her toward the bed and bent her over the edge of the mattress. No way would the guards leave the monitors with Carly bent over the bed like that.

Trey ran his hands over the warm skin of her perfect heart-shaped ass. He pulled her thong down in one swift move, yanking his own bottoms off next. He wanted her so badly his erection was bobbing with a life of its own.

He'd be fine once he had her. He'd have to be. This was just lust. That's all. And that's what he kept telling himself as he stood close behind her and nudged her feet farther apart with his. With a hand on each of her hips, he glanced at the mirror, saw himself and Carly reflected perfectly, and pushed inside her.

She was so wet and ready, he slid into her warmth easily. He drove into her hard, over and over again, gritting his teeth to make it last as long as possible. Trying to ignore how good it felt, he pounded into her until the cheeks of her ass were pink from the friction.

Carly's breathing got more labored and she began shaking. Pulling out, he turned her around. He wanted to see her face-to-face when she came again. Laying her on the mattress, he crawled between her thighs and poised at her entrance. Her lips were parted and her breath came in gasps as she stared up at him.

His gaze never leaving her face, he slid inside. She released a shaky breath as he entered her, his own body shuddering from the sensation. Reaching his hand between them, he connected with her clit and brought her to orgasm for a second time. The feel of her body gripping his and the sight of her face as she came overwhelmed him. He thrust once more and followed her, coming deep inside as her body milked his.

Totally consumed by Carly beneath him, the sound of Matt's panicked voice in his ear startled Trey right out of his blissful sex haze.

"Jack. Shit! You're not supposed to be in here."

He heard the click as Matt disconnected audio and that was it. Still buried deep inside Carly, Trey was left alone with the miserable knowledge the one man who shouldn't have seen what happened between him and Carly, had.

Her body pulsed one more time around him, an aftershock from her lingering orgasm, but there was no joy in it for him. He pulled out and, squeezing his eyes shut, rubbed a hand over his face to try and erase the misery.

When he opened his eyes again, Carly was watching him. Avoiding eye contact, he retrieved her panties off the floor and handed them to her. As she reached for them, he realized he didn't know if Jimmy was free yet.

Now what?

A click sounded and Matt was in his ear again. Trey said a silent thank you and waited. “We got Jimmy. I gotta go but you’re good, Trey. You’re done. We don’t need you anymore. Copy?”

Trey cleared his throat to indicate he had heard and understood the message.

Matt signed off with a hurried, “Roger that. Over and out.”

His only point of contact on this mission was silent once more. At least he’d gotten what he needed first. Jimmy was out of there and Trey didn’t have to prolong this thing with Carly.

She had already pulled her panties back on and had kicked off her heels, all while continuously glancing at him. After retrieving the nightgown from the floor where he’d dropped it, she crawled under the covers. The expression on her face told him she knew something was not right. He couldn’t explain about Jack because of the surveillance in the room. Nor could he explain the inner turmoil he felt, but that had nothing to do with the bad guys listening in on them.

Trey pulled the pajama bottoms on and shut off the light. Sliding into the bed, he lay down next to her. She snuggled closer, seeking contact. After the intimacy they’d just shared, how could he deny her that? He gave up fighting the urge and let himself pull her into his arms. She felt good there. Too good.

How could he possibly make love to this woman and then forget about it? Impossible.

Her fingertips brushed his cheek. He didn’t move. Her lips met his and he was torn between wanting her all over again and knowing the worst thing he could do was fall into this thing with her any deeper. The tip of her tongue slid between his lips and she moved closer until the length of her body was pressed against his.

Trey sucked in a deep breath. Maybe just one more time. The damage was already done. Once more couldn’t hurt. It would give him more memories for those long, cold lonely nights when he returned and was supposed to pretend nothing had happened.

Her hands pushed the elastic waistband of his pants down before she stroked his erection and his decision was made. Rolling on top of her, he captured Carly’s face in both of his hands. He kissed her hard and deep. Thrusting one hand into her hair, he slid the other one down, following the curves of her body. Her knee came up and hooked around his hip.

In the total darkness every breath she took resonated through him. The tiny sound she made in her throat when his tongue tangled with hers sent a tingle straight to his core.

No one could see them now. This time wouldn’t be about the mission. It was just about them and it shouldn’t be happening. That thought filled his head even as he pulled her panties off for the second time that night and plunged inside.

Chapter Eight

Trey didn't let himself rest that night. All hell would be breaking loose in the basement after the target's men discovered Jimmy's escape. He only hoped they didn't connect the team's infiltration with him and Carly. Why should they? The Smiths were simply newlyweds having sex. Nothing suspicious about it. Though the guards in charge of Jimmy would most likely pay a hefty price for watching them instead of their captive. They might even pay with their lives.

His mind circled around and around the possibilities and consequences until just after dawn when he felt Carly slip out of bed. She padded to the bathroom and he heard the shower start.

As the exhaustion began to catch up with him, Trey flung one arm over his eyes. He hadn't slept at all and now, sleep deprived and distracted as hell, he had to be at the top of his game for the meet. He needed to convince the target to trust him and hopefully build a long-lasting relationship. He also had to try to not get him and Carly killed in the process.

The terrorist they were after was an extremely powerful and very bad man. They didn't want him dead. If they had, Jimmy could have taken him out long ago. They wanted his boss and the best way to locate him was by getting admitted into the target's inner circle by doing business with him.

Finding John Smith and his computer had been a stroke of luck and the timing couldn't have been better, given the fact their only mole, Jimmy, had been compromised.

Trey told himself he only had to get through this one meet. After that, someone at Central should be able to handle all future correspondence electronically. They'd get the info they needed to find the leader out of the target. Hopefully the guy he was dealing with wasn't big on using the phone and Trey wouldn't be brought in again unless the bad guy requested another face-to-face. If that happened, he'd come alone with the team. No way was he bringing Carly here again.

Listening to the water still running in the shower, he pictured it sluicing off Carly's body and remembered the feel of being inside her last night. Trey remembered the taste of her, the scent of her. He had to physically shake his head to rid himself of the memories.

The voice inside, his own this time instead of Matt's, reminded him once again a distracted soldier was a dead soldier...accompanied by a dead civilian.

Damn it. Why did this Smith guy have to be such a ball-less bastard he would bring his wife along with him as cover for a meet with a terrorist?

Trey was going to have to get his mind fine-tuned again and fast. This was already a risky mission without the distraction of Carly. Add to that the fact Jimmy had been extracted right out from under the target's nose and their chances for success plummeted. Every bad guy in the vicinity would be on high alert after last night's escape. Every one in the area would be under suspicion. If only they could call off this meet, but that would only further alert the terrorist bastards.

Where the hell was Matt's voice when he needed it? He could use a little encouragement and an update about now. Glancing at the bedside clock, Trey realized Carly had been in the shower for a very long time.

Certain they were still under surveillance, he chose his words carefully. "Baby? You okay in there?"

When she didn't answer his heart leapt into his throat. Had they gotten to her? How? He'd checked the room the best he could, but knowing there were video cameras, he hadn't been as thorough as he should have.

Trey grabbed the doorknob with a suddenly sweaty palm. It turned easily. He opened the door and peered through the steam.

"Baby?" He tried to keep the panic from his voice.

She didn't answer and his pulse kicked into a higher gear.

With trepidation, he pulled open the shower curtain a few inches. Carly stood with both hands and her forehead pressed against the wall with the water hitting her in the back. She turned her head enough to look at him. "Is everything all right?"

He finally let himself breathe freely again even though this wasn't something he was prepared for. With all his agonizing about his own feelings, he'd barely considered Carly might be going through something herself.

Guilt overwhelmed him for invading what little privacy she had. The door hadn't been locked because that was one of the rules he'd laid out for her on the flight over. He needed to be able to get to her at all times in case anything happened.

Oh, something had happened, all right. He'd had sex with her not once, but twice. Hot, passionate, emotional sex that broke every rule in this very serious game they were playing.

"I was just concerned about you. You okay?"

"Fine." She paused and swallowed. "How much time do we have?"

"A while. Take all the time you need." He reached out and ran a fingertip down the side of her face.

She nodded and he let the curtain drop back into place. It wasn't until he'd closed the door behind him he heard the water stop.

They'd deal with this somehow later, but right now he had a meet to prepare for and she was going to have to find an outfit in a stripper's suitcase that would be appropriate for an appointment with a terrorist.

When exactly had this poor woman's life become so complicated? Unfortunately, he knew the answer. It was right about the time Task Force Zeta had walked into her bar.

With a sigh, Trey opened John Smith's laptop and was cruising around in the files when the bathroom door opened and Carly came out in a white robe and a burst of steam. He thought it best if he left her alone for a bit and tried to instead refresh his memory regarding the emails that had passed between Smith and the target. Though he found his eyes kept straying to watch her move about the room.

He wrestled his attention back to the laptop. The two men never came right out and named what this meet was about in any of their correspondence. That would make things trickier, but Trey knew from the research Matt had included in his folder Smith had been dealing small arms with some minor players in the terror world.

They also suspected Smith could get his hands on weapons-grade uranium if the incentive was high enough. Trey had a feeling that particular commodity was what this little rendezvous was about. If only he were here alone, things would be so much easier.

Trey thought he was doing a pretty good job of ignoring Carly and concentrating on the information until she threw the clothes in her hand to the floor with a huff.

"What the hell am I supposed to wear?" She turned and looked accusingly at him, as if it were his fault Candi hadn't packed the proper clothing for a meeting with a terrorist.

He'd done a lot of undercover ops in his years with the team and never once had he gotten stressed out over choosing an outfit, but she was a woman. All woman. A really, really hot woman. He had first-hand experience and could definitely attest to that.

Laying the laptop on the bed, he walked over to the suitcase. After a moment of careful consideration and searching, he handed her a short black skirt and one of John Smith's white button-down collared dress shirts. Now for the shoes...

His eyes landed briefly on the heels she'd worn last night. Those held way too many memories for both of them. He didn't need further distraction during this meeting. There must be another pair in there somewhere. Candi was a stripper. Shouldn't she have packed more than that one pair of high heels? When he didn't find another pair and boy did he try, he picked up the ones on the floor and thrust them at her. "Here. Put all that on. You'll look fine."

She looked doubtfully down at the bundle he'd handed her and carried it all into the bathroom. When she emerged again, she was looking pretty damn hot in the outfit he'd picked. She wasn't supposed to look hot. He'd given her the white men's shirt to cover her up, but somehow she made the damn thing look sexy.

All he needed was for the target to take a fancy to Carly. Then Trey would be forced to kill him with his bare hands. That might get him into trouble though since they needed the man alive. He considered that for about a second and then decided if the scum touched Carly, he'd still kill him.

His contemplation of the possible ramifications of going against a direct order and killing the one person this entire operation hinged upon was interrupted by Matt's voice. "Our goose has flown the coop, Trey."

"What?" Trey asked Matt, but looked at Carly when he said it in case surveillance was still in place.

She frowned at him. "I didn't say anything."

"Oh, I thought you did. Sorry."

Matt continued. "You heard me right. Elvis has left the building. Packed up, took most of his goons and pulled away in a big limo about ten minutes ago."

Just when Trey was deciding what to do with this information, the phone on the nightstand next to the bed rang. He shot Carly a look he hoped told her to be ready for anything and then answered it. Trey put the receiver to the ear with the implant so Matt could record the conversation.

"Hello, my friend." The voice coming through the phone line sounded smooth, too smooth. The kind of voice that made you immediately suspicious.

"Hello. It's nice to speak with you." Years of training kept Trey's voice sounding calm.

"Yes, yes. You too. I trust you had a good night?" Did the bastard sound smug?

"Yes, thank you. The room is lovely. My wife and I are enjoying it very much." He swallowed hard and glanced at Carly, regretting all over again the bastards had seen them together.

"I'm sure you are." There it was again, an amused, knowing lilt to the bastard's voice.

Trey had no doubt the target had a video copy of his and Carly's bedroom escapades in his slimy hand. He hoped that was all he held in his hand at the moment. The thought of him taking physical pleasure while watching Carly on tape had Trey mad enough to spit.

The target continued. "I must apologize, my friend."

You're no friend of mine. "Oh? Apologize for what?"

"I was called away suddenly. I'm not sure for how long I'll need to be away."

The coward was running scared. Jimmy disappearing without a trace had made him nervous, made him realize he was not untouchable. It was probably bad for the successful continuance of the mission, but somehow Trey was taking great satisfaction from it.

The fleeing bastard went on talking. "I'll not be able to make our meeting this morning. I'm afraid you traveled all this way for nothing. However, please stay and enjoy the room for as long as you and your beautiful wife wish. Order whatever you please from the hotel and whenever you are ready to leave, contact the front desk. They will arrange transportation to the airport."

Yeah, like he was going to get into his limo with that armed bruiser again now the target was suspicious. He wished the guy would stop talking so they could get the hell out of there. In particular, Trey really wanted him to stop referring to Carly.

“That is very kind of you. My wife and I appreciate it. Will I be hearing from you again soon?” *Come on. Give me something, you schmuck.*

“Yes, my friend. I’ll be in touch as soon as I’m settled. I look forward to doing business with you in the very near future.”

“I look forward to it also. Have a good day.” Trey was starting to get itchy. His eyes strayed to the open suitcase and the clothes all over the floor.

“You too, my friend.” The line went dead.

“Pack the bag, sweetheart. We’re going home.” Trey hung up the phone and grabbed the laptop.

Carly’s eyes opened wide, but she didn’t question him and did what she was told, obviously as anxious to get the hell out of there as he was. She packed the clothes into the suitcase so fast, he’d barely gotten the laptop put away and the toiletries from the bathroom and she was finished. She only stopped long enough to rip off the skin-tight skirt and pull a pair of leather pants out of the suitcase. Good idea. All she’d have to do was kick off those shoes. Much easier to run in pants should bullets start to fly. Though with neither of them in body armor, he really hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

He swallowed and tried not to stare at her ass in the thong as she yanked on the pants right there next to the suitcase. That was another clue Carly was as anxious to get out of there as he was. She’d dropped her skirt while standing in front of him without batting an eye.

In record time, Carly was changed and zipping the suitcase. Impressed, relieved and feeling so many other things he couldn’t begin to put a name to them all, he grabbed the bag and the laptop. Opening the door, he took one last look around the room and gratefully left.

When the elevator doors opened into the lobby, Trey took Carly’s hand and led her out onto the sidewalk without looking left or right. Making eye contact with an employee might inspire them to try and help them. There was nothing Trey wanted from any employee of the target’s hotel.

Outside, he could feel the anxiety radiating off Carly and kept a tight hold on her hand so she wouldn’t sprint down the road, heels and all. He couldn’t blame her. He wouldn’t breathe freely again until they were landing on US soil, but every step away from the hotel lightened the feeling of his burden, that burden being getting Carly home safely.

They walked silently for about a block before he stopped them in front of none other than a McDonald’s. Quintessential American fast food in the middle of Kosovo. Go figure.

In addition to the chain restaurants, Pristina, like any other capital city, had no shortage of taxis. Trey had no trouble hailing a cab to take them to the airport. Once inside the car, he took out the untraceable disposable cell phone he’d been given by Matt and called the pilot to make sure the jet would be ready and waiting when they arrived.

Trey's feeling of waiting for the other shoe to drop didn't dissipate until they were on the private jet and in the air. Then the other issue on his mind had time to surface. Carly and the fact this op was over and so were they.

Matt, most likely dressed as a maintenance man, had swept the aircraft and radioed to Trey it was clean so there was no further excuse for him to delay this conversation with Carly. He gathered every bit of professionalism in his being, even sitting straighter while strapped in next to her in the plane's seat.

Measuring his words carefully, Trey focused on keeping his voice even. "We need to go over a few things regarding the op."

She turned and looked at him. "Okay."

"We need to talk about last night."

That caused her to pause a bit before nodding. "All right."

He found himself staring at the magazine in her lap like it was the most interesting thing in the world before he wrestled his eyes up.

Trey cleared his throat. "I need confirmation you're on birth control."

Her eyebrows rose sharply. "Excuse me?"

"I need con—"

"I heard what you said." Gone was the casual demeanor, in its place one angry-looking woman.

"Carly. It's important."

"What was last night about? Really?"

"The mission." The lie flowed smoothly off his tongue, just like he'd been trained.

"The mission? And that's it?"

Trey nodded. "The mission."

He saw the pain cross her face before she looked away.

Swallowing hard, he tried to clear the lump from his throat. "You didn't answer my question. Are you on any sort of birth control?"

Her head swiveled sharply toward him. "That detail is not part of this mission."

"Yes, actually it is. We had unprotected sex in the course of this operation." Twice.

"Just forget it ever happened."

Forget about it. Yeah, not likely. He shook his head and let out a deep breath. "If you don't answer me now, you'll just have to answer the commander when we return."

The look she shot him was filled with hate. "Fine. I haven't had sex in over two years, Trey. So no, I'm not using the pill or anything else for birth control. What would be the point since when I'm not ordered to by the US military, I don't normally sleep around?" She returned to staring blindly at the same page open in her lap since this conversation had begun.

She obviously hated him now. That was probably for the best. Safer for all involved. Trey could stay professional in the face of anger. If she cried, her tears would break him.

"I'll arrange to have the morning after pill waiting for you when we land."

Carly, still not looking at him, blushed bright red. "I'll take care of things myself."

"I'm afraid standard operating procedure states in cases such as this—"

She spun on him. "Exactly how long will the military be in control of my personal life from this one favor I was stupid enough to agree to?"

"As soon as we land, we'll go over the mission details with the commander at the base. After we get you the pills, you'll be free to go." Trey tried to make it all sound so routine, though nothing felt routine to him right now. "It's for the best. The sooner you take it the better. Matt can arrange a prescription for you with Medical."

"Matt?"

Uh, oh. That got her attention. "You knew he was on surveillance for this op. I told you before we landed."

Her eyes narrowed. "He wasn't just listening to us on that thing in your ear, was he? He could see us. Now it all makes sense. *Dance for me. Face the mirror. Spread your legs for me, baby.* You were putting me on display. Tell me, Trey. How many were in the audience for your little lecherous peep show last night?"

There was so much truth in Carly's accusations, Trey felt sick to his stomach. "Too many and I'm sorry, but it wasn't my choice and it was absolutely necessary."

That, at least, was true for the first half of the night. The second half she was totally right about. He was a leech. There had been no reason for him to make love to her in the dark after Jimmy had already been rescued except for the fact he'd wanted to. That was something he could never tell her. He needed to maintain a strictly professional relationship with her, then maybe she'd be able to pick things up in her life and with Jack as if nothing had happened.

"Necessary?" Her voice reached a level that told him exactly how unhappy she was. "Why? Why was it *necessary*, Trey?"

He hesitated, deciding what he could and couldn't reveal. "We saved a man's life last night, Carly."

She crossed her arms and stared at him. "Forgive me if I don't understand how what we did last night saved a life."

Trey owed her an explanation, even if he was treading a fine line regarding the rules. "This information can't leave this plane, but Jack's brother was being tortured in the basement of our hotel. We provided the distraction that allowed his escape. That's all I can tell you and I probably shouldn't have even said that much. I truly hope it's enough."

He watched her react as the expression of her face changed from anger to shock to understanding.

She was quiet for a moment before she spoke again. "Did your commander watch us too?"

"Um..." Trey wasn't sure about that answer. The rest of the team, except for Matt on surveillance and Jack because he was too close to the situation, would have been occupied getting Jimmy out. The commander, however, could have very well been sitting there watching the video feed of both the guards in the basement and their room upstairs. Good thing he hadn't thought of that last night.

"No, Trey." Matt's voice filled his ear. "The commander was on sight with the team."

Carly still watched him, waiting for his answer.

"He didn't see." Relieved, Trey relayed that news to Carly.

She still didn't look happy. "Will he?"

"I don't see any reason why he should need to see it." Unless the commander wanted to see if he and Carly had somehow compromised their cover and sent the target running. Though most likely he ran because of Jimmy's escape, not anything they'd done in their room. Trey couldn't tell her any of that so he left it alone.

"Will the recording of us be shown at the next boys' night out so you can all laugh about it?"

Ow. That one hurt.

"No, Carly. Matt's a professional. We're all professionals." Thinking about sliding into her the second time for no good reason didn't make him feel very professional.

She let out a big sigh. "If you could arrange for the prescription, I'd be willing to take it."

He nodded. "Okay. Thank you."

Matt was obviously still eavesdropping. His voice filled Trey's ear once again. "I'll take care of it, Trey."

Nothing like living life on constant display.

He should tell her the rest too, though he had a feeling it wasn't going to be pretty.

"Carly, there's one more thing."

When she spun her head to face him again, he saw the weariness in her. They both needed a good night's rest, but she looked like she couldn't take much more on her shoulders right now and he was about to dump more on top of her.

How he would love to say never mind and forget about the whole thing. Unfortunately, he couldn't.

"He wasn't supposed to, but Jack walked in and saw the live feed of us last night." Trey felt like he needed to explain and apologize even though there wasn't anything he could have done about it. "I'm pretty sure it was only for a few seconds before Matt got him out of there, but I thought you would want to know. I'm sorry."

She closed her eyes and shook her head.

"Yeah, me too." Her voice was soft and full of regret.

Chapter Nine

Carly stepped onto the tarmac and fought the urge to drop to her knees and kiss the ground. She had never been so happy to be on American soil in her life. More importantly, she was one step closer to being free of this military bullshit and Trey so she could get back to her bar and her life and forget any of this had ever happened. As if she could really do that.

Trey must have seen the need to bolt reflected on her face. He touched her arm for just a second and then dropped his hand. “You’ll have to come back to the base with me to be debriefed by the commander. Then you can go home.”

The thought of how Trey had already “debriefed” her in Kosovo flew into Carly’s head. A short, bitter laugh burst out before she could control it. That juvenile reaction made her realize she was most likely starting to lose her mind. Either that or she was giddy from lack of sleep.

She glanced at Trey as he raised a brow over her outburst like the staid poster boy for military protocol that he was. His words on the flight echoed in her brain, fueling her anger.

Standard operating procedure clearly states...

How could he be so cold and businesslike after the night they’d shared? His quoting SOP to her after what they’d done together had left no doubt in her mind that what she’d been stupid enough to assume was a real attraction between them had been nothing more than a job to him. Maybe it was her pride hurting more than anything else, which was exactly what she deserved for breaking her own rules and letting herself succumb to temptation.

In any case, he was still waiting for her to say something. “I know I have to go in. You already told me. Believe me, I’m as anxious as you are to have this thing over and done with so I can get back to my life and forget it ever happened.”

His calm demeanor didn’t crack at her comment or the less-than-nice tone in which it was delivered. No surprise there.

At least she’d been able to change into her own clothes on the flight. That helped her feel more grounded, more normal. She’d had enough of Candi’s clothes, especially those damn high heels. They caused too many memories, not to mention blisters.

With blisters that made even her sneakers hurt, Carly limped into the meeting room behind Trey. There she faced five men whose heads all swiveled immediately in her direction when she entered. Wishing she could crawl beneath the linoleum, she wondered again exactly how much they all knew.

From the doorway she spotted Matt and felt her face heat at the knowledge he for certain had watched the whole sordid performance Trey had put on the night before. That pissed her off all over again until the sight of Jack made her forget her anger and embarrassment took over.

She didn't have long to feel ashamed however, because they were barely inside the room when Jack leapt forward, red faced.

"You rotten son of a bitch." He pulled back his fist and let the punch fly, clocking Trey with a blow that would have leveled a smaller man.

Carly hopped to the side to avoid Trey who took a step back when the blow threw him off balance. The entire team seemed to hold its collective breath, but no one moved a muscle to either help or stop the fight. Carly too stood frozen in place except for the wild pounding of her heart.

Trey's head had whipped back from the hit, but he stayed put and didn't even raise a fist. He stared calmly at Jack as if waiting for the next punch, but it never came. Instead, Jack stepped forward and grabbed Trey in a bear hug, audibly squeezing the breath out of him. "Thanks for saving my brother."

She saw the expression of shock cross Trey's face as he accepted the embrace. When they broke apart, he touched his jaw, working it from side to side. "You're welcome."

Jack came to her next. He raised a hand to her cheek and smiled. "Hey, darlin'."

Carly returned his smile hesitantly. How exactly should she act in this situation? This guy had an obvious crush on her and had just seen his best friend screwing her on camera. She'd like to know the standard operating procedure for handling that one. "Hi, Jack."

He leaned forward and brushed a soft kiss across her cheek. "I'm so glad you're home safe."

The commander stood in his office doorway, watching the whole exchange and not looking very happy. "You three, in my office."

"Three? Me too, sir?" Jack sounded surprised.

"Yes, you." The man turned and walked to his desk obviously assuming they'd follow, which they did.

Carly walked behind Trey and Jack when Matt grabbed her hand and slipped a pill bottle into it. Managing an embarrassed nod, she clutched the prescription in a tight fist. Could this get any more embarrassing? As she entered the office behind Trey and Jack, she had a feeling it could.

"Close the damn door, McAfee." The commander delivered his order like a man who was used to being followed without question.

"Yes, sir." She did as she was told.

He waited until she had before he laid into Jack. "What the hell is going on, Gordon?"

"Nothing, sir."

"It didn't look like nothing to me." When Jack remained silent, the commander addressed Trey. "Williams, would you like to fill me in?"

“No, sir. I mean there’s nothing to be filled in on, sir.”

“So you’re going to tell me you two beat the hell out of each other after every mission?”

Trey kicked at the floor with the toe of his sneaker. “He didn’t exactly beat the hell out of me, sir.”

The commander raised a brow. “No, I suppose he could have hit you harder if he really wanted to. I’m going to assume your little show out there was a one-time event. Am I right or wrong?”

“Right, sir.” Jack and Trey spoke in unison.

“McAfee.”

Carly jumped. She had been eyeing the water cooler and deciding if she could take the pill without anyone noticing when he called her name.

“Yes, sir?”

“Good job. Go home.”

“Sir?”

“Go home. The two heavyweight champions here can take care of the paperwork and the debriefing. If I need you for anything, I know where to find you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

He smiled. “Thank you, McAfee. Oh and remember, not a word to anyone.”

A bitter laugh burst out of her before she could stop it. “They wouldn’t believe me if I told them, sir. But no, not a word.”

She couldn’t wait to be on the other side of the door and away from them all. Being the third side in this little triangle was more than she could deal with right now. Glancing from Jack to Trey, she got out of the office as fast as she could.

It would feel very good to get home. Time to start getting things back to normal, though she had a strong suspicion she’d never feel normal again.

*

Trey gladly handled the mission follow-up without Carly. Having her there would have taken more mental capacity than he had after the night they’d spent together doing everything except sleeping. Of course, Jack was still there right next to him like the living breathing personification of his own conscience. A constant reminder he’d not only stepped across the line with Carly, but had also trampled all over Jack’s toes in the process.

To Jack’s credit, following the initial punch he’d thrown he’d acted pretty much normal as he and Trey waited on line with the rest of the team to turn in all equipment they’d been issued for the op.

Then came the paperwork—the bane of the existence of every man and woman in the US military. Trey sat at his desk with a form in front of him and a pen in his hand, but being prepared with the necessary items didn’t get the papers filled out any easier.

The task was simple enough. He was going to have to write an account for the expenses he'd charged to John Smith's credit card for things like the rental car and the taxi, but he'd barely filled out his name because he wasn't really there. Instead, his mind was at Carly's.

Jack sat at the desk next to him, scribbling away. He looked down at his own nearly blank page. This was going to take a long time at this rate.

He sighed and Jack glanced up at the sound. "That paper's not going to fill out itself while you stare at the wall."

Trey laughed. "I guess I didn't take whatever speed writing course you did."

It seemed he and Jack were just going to forget about the obvious and go back to being friends even though his jaw still hurt like hell. The bruise was already starting to show but it didn't matter if getting it out of his system had helped Jack get over what he'd seen. He owed Jack that much.

"You just need the right motivation, that's all. The sooner I get done, the sooner I can go get a beer."

That captured Trey's wandering attention. No wonder Jack was in such a hurry to finish his paperwork. He was anxious to get to Carly. Trey bit the inside of his cheek to try to stop himself from asking the question, but it came out anyway. "You going to Carly's?"

"Yup." Jack's single spoken word carried far more meaning today than it normally would. He was in fact telling Trey he was still going after Carly, no matter what had happened in Kosovo.

His stomach clenched. "Maybe you should give her a little time. It's been a tough couple of days."

Jack narrowed his eyes. "Are you going to ask Carly out?"

Trey frowned. "Me? No, of course not."

Jack raised a brow. "Why not?"

"I don't need the distraction of a girlfriend right now."

Glancing down, he tapped a finger on Trey's blank report. "You look plenty distracted to me already."

For a man who talked like some country hick, Jack could be really perceptive sometimes. He was dead-on this time and Trey had a feeling his distraction wasn't going to get any better either, particularly if Jack ended up dating Carly.

He shook the unpleasant thought off.

"Yeah, well. It's been a tough couple of days for me too." Trey sighed and then dropped the pen. "Look, Jack. I have to say this. I'm sorry. I'm sorry it had to happen and I'm really sorry you had to see it."

Jack shook his head. "I know, Trey. You had to. Matt explained it to me. It was his idea and it saved Jimmy, so how can I hold it against you?"

The first time had been Matt's idea and necessary, but the second time? That incident was all Trey and the guilt over it nearly overwhelmed him as he took in the sincerity of Jack's expression.

"I'm fine. We're fine." Jack waved a hand to indicate the two of them. "And I'm sorry I punched you. It's just...no stud likes to share his filly, you know?"

Trey wouldn't have worded it that way exactly, but... "Yeah, I know."

"Finish that up. I'll wait for you." Arms folded, Jack leaned against his desk.

Trey shook his head. "No, you go ahead. I think I'm going to try to stay out of her face for a while. Things have been a little awkward since we, uh, were, um together."

Jack laughed. "Yeah, I can imagine. Actually, that's all I can do is imagine, not having experienced it myself."

Trey winced. All may be forgiven, but not quite yet forgotten.

"But it's fine," Jack continued, "One day when Carly and I are celebrating our wedding anniversary, the three of us will all get together and laugh about this."

Anniversary? Shit. Trey thought about Jack and Carly married. Nothing about it was remotely amusing. He forced a smile and said goodbye to Jack, even as the iron vise tightened around his chest.

Chapter Ten

Carly wiped down the bar. She was so happy to be home and back to her life again, she didn't even care she was tired or that her feet radiated pain every time her sneakers rubbed the blisters on her heels.

Nope. Everything was fine. Good. Back to normal. She'd only grabbed a few hours of restless sleep on the plane, but she'd had to take the shift tonight since no one else was scheduled. That was okay, though. She was back in her own bar where she was the boss and didn't have to follow anyone else's rules, and she'd already taken the pill Matt had slipped her.

Things were back to normal. Her usual, boring and predictable life looked pretty damn good after the past few days...until she looked up to see Jack walk through the door.

She held her breath and waited, but Trey was not behind him.

Carly tried to deny the fact her heart had just stopped beating as she forced a smile. "Hi, Jack."

"Hey, darlin'." Jack's glance swept the nearly empty bar as he perched his butt on a bar stool directly in front of her. "Slow day?"

Slow didn't come close to describing it.

"Yeah, but that's fine. I'm a little jetlagged." Knowing she couldn't tell anyone the truth about her absence, Carly kept her voice low.

She'd told her relief bartender she'd packed a bag and gone out of town to help an old college girlfriend who had an emergency. Since she lived in an apartment above the bar, there'd been no way to avoid someone noticing she was gone.

Pursing his lips, Jack nodded. "I'm kind of glad it's slow. Not for your business of course, but it will give us a chance to talk."

Talk? Carly didn't know if she was ready for this discussion right now. Swallowing hard, she steeled her nerves. "Talk about what?"

"About that maybe you gave me the other night. I'm hoping you've decided to turn that maybe into a yes." His slow, sweet smile was enough to melt any woman's heart. Any woman who wasn't fighting it as hard as she was.

"I don't date military guys, Jack. You know that."

Maybe she should have that credo made into a sign and hang it behind the bar. If nothing else, it would serve to remind her what happened when she gave in to temptation. How she'd seduced Trey in the darkness only to have him act like it was all a job the next day proved she obviously needed reminding.

"I know that, darlin', but you forgot about your rule with me the other night. I may have been drunk, but I remember our kiss perfectly and it was really nice. Wasn't it?"

"Yes." She couldn't deny it. It had been nice. Just like Jack was nice and sweet, and kind and funny.

He was just the kind of guy Carly should like, and she did like him in spite of her saying no to all his invitations. She held firm on her rule with Jack, who was so obviously interested in her. Meanwhile, she'd let herself get attached to Trey, who had no interest in her at all.

Even so, the thought of Trey took her breath away and made her heart begin to pound. She'd watched the door for him to come in all day. She craved him like an alcoholic craves a drink. Why? Because he didn't want her back.

Typical. All of her quoting her rules to any man who asked her out was obviously just crap because she'd gone and let herself get attached to the wrong man yet again.

Damn it. She was going to have to get over Trey because she had meant nothing to him but a part of a mission.

"Darlin'?" Jack touched her hand lightly and brought her attention to the present.

"Sorry. I'm a bit distracted."

Jack raised his brow. "I see that. You're not the only one."

Assuming he was talking about himself being worried about his brother, she lowered her voice. "How is your brother?"

He smiled. "He's pretty banged up, but he's alive. You can't ask for more than that. He's still in the hospital in Germany, but they should be transporting him home before too long. Thanks for asking."

She grabbed two beers out of the cooler and popped the tops. She slid one to Jack and kept the other for herself. She needed it after what she'd been through lately. "On me. Here's to his complete recovery."

Jack raised his bottle in a toast and then sipped the beer. He played a bit with a bead of sweat running down the glass as he raised his gaze to her. "What's with the military-men rule, darlin'? Who hurt you?"

Carly looked at him with surprise. This guy was either really perceptive or she was an open book. She had a feeling it was the latter. "Just some asshole."

He tilted his head. "Some asshole ruined it for all the rest of us? Where is he? I'd like to show him what I think about that."

She smiled. She hadn't had someone want to beat anyone up for her in a long time. "Sorry. He's clear across the country now with his wife and kid." Maybe kids plural by now for all she knew.

"Well, if you ask me, it's a damn shame to throw out the whole pie just because the crust got a little burnt."

Carly laughed. It had been a long time since anyone had made her laugh either.

Jack smiled. "You should laugh more. I like it."

Contemplating her current situation, Carly took another sip of her beer and let the cold foam slide down her tightened throat. She didn't date military men, yet here she was, pining over one anyway. Maybe it was a stupid rule. A doctor or a lawyer or a garbage man could hurt her too. Maybe if she hadn't been living like a nun the last few years, she wouldn't have been so affected by Trey after just one night in bed with him.

"Okay."

Jack raised one sandy brow. "Okay what, darlin'?"

"I'll go out with you." She had to laugh again because Jack couldn't have looked more surprised if she had gotten up on the bar and done a striptease. She quickly pushed the thought of her recent striptease out of her mind.

He'd stopped with the beer halfway to his mouth and just gaped at her. She pushed the hand holding the beer down to the bar. "Close your mouth before a bug flies in."

A smile spread wide across Jack's face. "When?"

If she was going to do this, then why not make it right away? "I have to work tonight. Is tomorrow night good for you?"

"Hell yeah, tomorrow's good and even if it wasn't I'd make it work." He cocked his head to the side and sobered for a second. "Not that I'm one to look a gift horse in the mouth, but what made you change your mind?"

She laughed. "Believe it or not, I think it was the burnt-pie analogy."

He smiled and raised his beer again. "I'll remember to thank Mama for that one next time I call."

A man who loved his mama. Jack couldn't be more perfect...unless he were Trey.

Trey was experiencing the restlessness he always had after one op ended and another had yet to begin. Only this time it seemed worse. He'd decided to try to sweat the feeling out of him. He and Jack were currently in the middle of a long run. The only problem was it wasn't working. Now he was both sweaty and restless.

"Hey, Jack. You want to come over to my place tonight and watch the game? Or we can go to the bar if you want." He'd given Carly her space for a day. That should be enough. Besides, he missed the bar. That's what he was telling himself anyway.

"Um, actually, I'm busy."

"Busy? Doing what?" Trey frowned. Jack never gave up an opportunity to go to Carly's.

Jack stopped running, so Trey stopped too. "She said yes."

Feeling his eyes pop open wide, he hoped he'd jumped to the wrong conclusion. "She said yes? Carly? To your date?"

Wiping the sweat from his face with the hem of his T-shirt, Jack nodded. “Yup. I almost died myself. We’re going out tonight.”

Suddenly sick to his stomach, Trey pressed a hand to his side. He must have run too hard.

Trey was having trouble wrapping his head around this. He had thought he was safe since she’d been saying no to Jack for about two years now. Trey couldn’t date her, but that didn’t mean he wanted to see her dating anyone else either. He supposed that sounded selfish but really, she’d been with him only two days ago. How could she say yes to a date with Jack only two days after she’d been in his bed?

What was that Jack had said about sharing his filly?

He wiped the sweat from his face, still speechless. He should be congratulating his best friend. This was exactly what Jack had wanted for a long time now. Instead, he paced in a small circle, trying to walk off the sick feeling in his stomach.

“You feeling all right?” Jack watched him with concern, while he was having trouble looking at Jack at all.

“Fine, just a cramp or something. I think I’m done for the day. I better head in.”

“I’ll walk with you. I want to get home anyhow. I’ve got to shower and pick up some flowers before I go get Carly. And I’ve got to get my bed sheets out of the dryer.”

His bed sheets. Trey bent over, braced his hands on his knees and tried his best not to vomit right there on Jack’s running shoes.

Chapter Eleven

Jack had been the absolutely perfect date. He'd arrived exactly on time. Not too early so she wasn't ready and not too late so she was afraid she'd been stood up. He'd brought her a beautiful bouquet of white lilies and opened every door and pulled out every chair. He'd chosen just the right restaurant too. Not so expensive she felt obligated to him in any way, but not so cheap she'd think he was stingy either.

So why now, as he walked her to the backdoor of the bar where the entrance to her apartment was, did she fear what was probably going to come next?

Jack stepped in close and raised his hand to her face. He stared deep into her eyes and smiled. "They're green."

His comment took her by surprise. "Yeah."

He frowned a bit. "Hmm. Why have I never noticed that before?"

The memory of how Trey had surprised her by knowing the color of her eyes the day before they left for Kosovo hit her.

Was that really just a few days ago? It seemed more like a year. So much had happened between them. And why was she thinking about Trey?

Damn it. This date was so she could move on and forget him. Although, if that was really the case, she probably shouldn't have picked his best friend to forget him with. She looked up at Jack. What the hell was she doing?

He lowered his head a bit. "Carly, can I kiss you?"

Her heart rate sped with nervous energy as she nodded. Jack lowered his mouth to hers and pressed his lips softly to hers. He was a good kisser, both sober and drunk.

His gentle, almost chaste kisses lulled her into a sense of security. This was fine. Pleasant actually. She could do this. She could like Jack. Though why the hell was she thinking so much? She didn't remember being able to think at all the first time Trey had kissed her, or the second, for that matter.

Jack stepped even closer, his leg between hers now. He wrapped his big hands around her head and tangled them in her hair. As he kissed her harder, his lips parted and his tongue sought hers. She stiffened at first but forced herself to relax, allowing him to kiss her the way he wanted.

Then he broke away and leaned his forehead against hers with a short laugh. "You're not doing such a good job, darlin'."

"Huh?"

“Of pretending you like me. You’re trying, but you’re not really here with me, are you?”

She shook her head. “Jack—”

“Shhh. It’s all right.” He placed one finger across her lips to silence her. “I don’t blame you. If I was a woman, hell, I’d be in love with him too.”

He was talking about Trey. How did he know? She shook her head again to deny it, but then the tears started and there was nothing she could do about it. “I’m sorry.”

“Oh, darlin’.” He wrapped her in his arms and rubbed her back. “Let’s go upstairs. You put on your favorite pj’s, I’ll tuck you on the couch under a nice blanket and then I’ll make you some tea. We’ll talk about you and him and what we’re gonna do about it.”

Through her tears she grabbed onto the one topic that wouldn’t make her cry harder. “You know how to make tea?”

Jack smiled and took the keys out of her hand. “Darlin’, I’m Southern. We invented tea, or was that the mint julep?”

Across the parking lot in his truck with the lights turned off, Trey watched Jack kiss Carly then lead her up the stairs to what he assumed was her apartment. The fact he was basically stalking them made him realize he was a sick, sick man, both mentally and now physically too. He watched the light go on first in what looked like a living room and then in her bedroom, before she closed the blinds.

He closed his eyes and banged his head against the steering wheel. What the hell was he going to do? Jack and Carly were up there together doing who knew what. Actually, that wasn’t true. Trey knew what.

They were doing what he should be doing with her right now. What they’d done together in Kosovo. What they could be doing together right now if he hadn’t acted like a stubborn ass and pretended their time together meant nothing more to him than a mission.

After a few more bangs of his forehead, he left his head resting there against the truck’s steering wheel.

Feeling miserable and exhausted, he must have dozed off in the darkness. He awoke with a start to the sound of someone knocking on his truck window. Groaning, he saw it was Jack staring at him through the glass. He was so busted. How was he going to explain this?

Trey rolled down the window with what he was sure was a very guilty look on his face. “Hi.”

Jack shook his head and laughed. “You two stubborn fools are just incredible.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You and Carly, that’s what. You’re in love with her and either too stupid to realize it or too stubborn to admit it.”

Trey sat there, chastised, and let Jack call him both stupid and stubborn. What could he say? It was true. He glanced at the clock. They'd been in her apartment for nearly two hours. What did it matter? Even if he did admit his feelings, to himself and to her, it was too late now.

Folding his arms, Jack twisted his lips into a scowl. "Well? At least admit I'm right."

"I'm sorry, Jack. I really am happy for you two. I know you care about her and you'll be good to her. She deserves a nice guy like you."

Jack shook his head. "Get out of the truck."

Obviously Jack was going to hit him again. That was all right. He deserved it. Getting out, he braced himself for the blow.

"Get up those stairs, you fool." Holding the door open for him, Jack pointed toward the entrance to Carly's.

Trey shook his head. "I don't... Why?"

"Because she doesn't want me, Einstein. She wants you. She always has."

Trey swallowed hard and saw a ray of hope for the first time since Jack had told him about his date with Carly. "You and she... You didn't..."

"No. Even if she hadn't been bawling her eyes out over you, I still wasn't going to sleep with her tonight. It's our first date, plus it's only two nights after she'd been with you. That's not how I roll, Trey. You know that."

Still in shock, he managed a nod. "I know."

Jack continued. "Besides, when she's kissing me, I know she's thinking about kissing you. I'm not willing to be anyone's second choice."

God, Jack really was a nice guy. "But you said you were falling in love with her. You were talking about marriage."

He shrugged. "Hey, I'm a lover. What can I say? I fell in love with every girl on the pep squad in high school too. I'll get over her, but you better treat her right or so help me God—"

"You'll punch me again?" Trey gingerly touched his bruised chin.

"Yeah, only this time maybe I'll actually knock you down." Jack laughed and then got serious again. "You deserve her more than I do, you know."

Trey shook his head. "I doubt it. Why would you say that?"

"She told me how that day, when I didn't know the color of her eyes, you knew. I guess I was always too busy looking at other things."

To be perfectly honest, Trey himself had looked at those other things too.

Jack grabbed him in a hug and then shoved him toward Carly's door. "Now hurry before she falls asleep. Poor thing's all plum tuckered out from crying over you."

“Thanks, Jack.” Slamming the driver’s side door, Trey realized he’d left the key in the ignition and the truck unlocked. Not caring, he ran across the parking lot.

After sprinting up the stairs two at a time, he was faced with Carly’s door. Steeling his nerves, he knocked.

“Did you forget something, Jack?” She opened the door, looking just as Jack had described her, plum tuckered out with eyes red from crying over him. And he had never been so happy to see her.

“Hi.”

Her eyes opened wider at the sight of Trey standing at her door rather than Jack. “Um, hi.”

Suddenly Trey felt like a shy schoolboy who didn’t know what to say to a girl. “Can I come in?”

Carly backed up enough for him to step through the doorway. Once inside, he couldn’t wait anymore. He just spilled it all.

“Jack says you’re in love with me. Is it true?” She looked horrified, so he rushed on. “Because I really hope it is true. Carly, I’m so in love with you it hurts to breathe.”

Her face crumbled as she started to cry and flung herself at him at the same time. Wrapping his arms around her, he buried his face in her hair.

“Is this a yes?” He mentally crossed his fingers, hoping, until she nodded against his chest.

Relieved beyond all comprehension, Trey pulled far enough away to capture her mouth with his. She returned his kiss with the intensity of a drowning woman looking for oxygen.

When he finally had to stop for air, she laughed tearfully. “That’s what a kiss is supposed to feel like.”

Confused, Trey frowned. “I agree with you. Why? Was there ever any question about that?”

Carly shook her head and touched his face. “No, not really.”

About the Author

As an award-winning author of contemporary erotic romance in genres including military, cowboy, ménage and paranormal, Cat Johnson uses her computer so much she wore the letters off the keyboard within a year. She is known for her creative marketing and research practices. Consequently, Cat owns an entire collection of camouflage shoes for book signings and a fair number of her consultants wear combat and cowboy boots for a living. In her real life, she's been a marketing manager, professional harpist, bartender, tour guide, radio show host, Junior League president, sponsor of a bull-riding rodeo cowboy, wife and avid animal lover.

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Look for these titles by Cat Johnson

Now Available:

Rough Stock

Studs in Spurs

Unridden

Bucked

The heart wants what it wants...

Rough Stock

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Bronc riders Mason and Clay have shared both good times and bad as best friends, but they never expected to share their boss's daughter, April. Can two friends love one woman, body and soul, without it destroying them?

The heart wants what it wants. For April that means not choosing between the two cowboys she loves, no matter how wrong it may seem inviting them both into her bed.

Life sends the three lovers in opposite directions, but a devastating injury brings them all together again. Their relationship now is no less bittersweet—or complicated—than before. Once severed, old ties leave scars that are tough to heal...

This book has been previously published and has been revised and expanded from its original release.

Warning: When you choose a man who thinks 8 seconds is a long time, perhaps you need two of them. In other words: Watch out, this book contains hot ménage sex with two cowboys and the woman they love.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Rough Stock:

The sudden appearance of pale, silky, feminine stomach stopped Clay Harris dead in his tracks. His greedy eyes devoured the smooth, firm skin shadowed beneath the newfound lushness of her breasts.

He swallowed hard. "April Elizabeth Carson. What do you think you're doing?"

She paused to look at him, one hand stopped in mid-motion as it tugged the hem of her shirt up over her bra—her white, thin, lacy bra. "What? It's hot. I'm going swimming."

Clay's best friend, Mason Smith, shot him a meaningful glance, a wide-eyed look of fear mingled with anticipation. "Um, shouldn't you go home and change into a suit first?" Mason suggested.

"Why? The house is so far and I'm hot now." Her guileless pale blue eyes proved she didn't have a clue what she was doing to them.

Clay knew exactly what Mason was thinking when he made the suggestion about the swimsuit. Their good old buddy April, who they'd met when they came to work for her father five years ago, was hot all right, but not in the way she'd meant when she said it. She had filled out over the past school year. April had turned eighteen and out of the blue transformed from an underweight, gangly teenage girl whom they had always treated like one of the guys into someone who was all female. One look at her and all of her new shapely curves and there was no denying it.

Clay swallowed hard. She was going to whip off her T-shirt and shorts and dive into that lake in nothing but her bra and underwear, like she had done at least once or twice each summer whenever the heat

got unbearable. But this time, unlike the others, his raging eighteen-year-old male hormones would not be able to ignore it. Nor would she be able to ignore his hard-on, which was already starting to wake up just at the thought.

“Shit,” Mason drawled out softly next to him as April did exactly as they feared, and what Clay suspected they both secretly wanted.

Stripped down to white bikini undies and the lace bra that looked nothing like last year’s plain cotton tank-top style one, April pulled the elastic band out of her ponytail to release a tumbling cascade of long blond curls, and then dove into the clear lake water.

Hell, this was way better than sneaking peeks inside the skin magazines when the store clerk wasn’t looking, but April was their friend. Now that she had turned into a woman, enjoying ogling her just seemed wrong, not to mention very weird.

Clay felt the already stifling Oklahoma heat around him ratchet up another notch. He wasn’t convinced it had anything to do with the weather, even though it had never been quite this hot during the last week of the school year before. Now was a hell of a time for the weather to go wonky, Clay thought, as he and Mason watched April’s progress.

She swam beneath the surface, gliding as easily as a fish through the water, before surfacing with a splash and a shake of her long, wet hair. Fish? Hell, she was more like a mermaid, and every man’s wet dream.

“Aren’t you two coming in?”

Hands buried deeply in both pockets, Mason surreptitiously adjusted himself within his jeans and glanced quickly at Clay. “Um, we need to get to the farm and start breaking that green horse your daddy just brought in or he’s gonna tan our hides.”

Barely comprehending Mason’s excuse over his own lusty thoughts, Clay nodded at whatever his friend had just said.

“Fine. I’ll get out. It’s no fun swimming alone.” With a pretty pout worthy of a centerfold, April stood, the water sluicing off satin skin that Clay longed to run his hands over, his tongue too while he was at it.

She began walking toward them, her water-soaked bra and panties so see-through she might as well have been wearing nothing. Though somehow this was more enticing.

Clay swallowed again and nearly choked. He realized he had no spit in his mouth, even though he seemed to have plenty of sweat on his palms. He wiped them on the denim covering his thighs while what he really longed to do was reach down and adjust himself, because the seam of his stiff jeans was not doing his now wide-awake hard-on any good.

Before them, April bent over to grab her clothes off the grass, revealing the tops of two creamy breasts. Clay had barely noticed the plump globes above the scalloped edge of her bra before. He’d been

too distracted by the dusky traces of her nipples through the wet material, not to mention the barely visible outline of the pale curls beneath her undies that proved she was a natural blonde.

Mason hissed out a breath next to him. "Crap, Clay. This just ain't right."

Clay didn't take his eyes off April as she dressed, wiggling and jumping to get her clothes on over wet skin. The act was somehow as enticing as a striptease, only in reverse. As April sat on the grass to pull her boots on, Clay asked, "What ain't right?"

Mason, the dark-haired, brown-eyed compliment to Clay's paler dirty blond, blue-eyed appearance, glowered. "You know damn well. She's our friend."

A quick sideways glance told Clay that in spite of his sudden moral protest, Mason hadn't taken his eyes off of April either. Clay grinned at him. "Yeah, but now she's our really hot female friend."

Mason finally broke his gaze from the sight that consumed them both to look at his buddy. He let out a resolution-filled sigh. "Yeah, she is, but how do you reckon we decide which one of us gets to take a shot at having her?"

This cowboy is looking for more than just an eight-second ride.

Bucked

© 2009 Cat Johnson

Mustang Jackson does two things well—ride bulls and love women. So the injury that takes him out of the arena leaves him only one way to make a living. Unfortunately, getting paid to be a stud in front of the camera isn't as fun as private conquests. When he catches sight of little Sage Beckett, minus the glasses, braces and pigtails he remembers, doing time in his hometown suddenly gets a lot more interesting.

Sage had a crush on Michael long before he started using that ridiculous nickname "Mustang". Though from what she's overheard about his string of buckle bunnies, the man more than lives up to it. In the past he always looked right through her. Now that he's home again, she's determined to capture and tame this wild stallion, no matter what it takes.

She intends to satisfy her curiosity and move on, but with every touch she's less sure she'll ever purge him from her system. Once corralled in her arms, Mustang finds himself thinking that domestication may not be so bad after all.

Except, once she finds out about his side job, she may not stick for the next go-round.

Warning: Contains one well-hung cowboy riding much more than just bulls, some ménage action in front of and behind the camera, some whips and chains and some red-hot cowboy loving.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Bucked:

Rosemary used to sneak boys into her room after their grandmother had gone to sleep all the time. Sage tried to remember that as she felt guilty about plotting on how best to seduce Mustang under her grandmother's roof.

She remembered the purpose of his visit and turned on her own TV, grabbing the remote control off the top and carrying it back to the bed. She perched on the other side of the bed, but since it was a twin-size they were still pretty close. For the first time in recent years she was happy the mattress was so narrow.

Finding the right channel, she turned the volume up just enough that they could hear it and set the remote on the bed table. "It looks like it just started."

"Yup."

He was in a strange mood. "You look tired."

"A little." Mustang shrugged. "Long day."

Sage jumped on the chance. "Yeah? What did you do?"

"Work."

Hmm. A one-word answer. It must have been a really bad day. Sage groaned in commiseration. “You have a bad drive with your dad?”

“No. Different work.” His short answers told her he didn’t want to talk about it.

“Oh. Okay.” Sage folded her hands in her lap and pretended to care about what was happening on screen.

She heard Mustang sigh and then his arm was around her shoulder. Luckily, he’d sat on the side that put the good arm, the one not in the sling, next to her.

Sage glanced sideways at Mustang and he answered her unspoken question. “I think I could use a hug.”

Mustang Jackson, the mighty bull rider, asking for a hug. Even in the old days when his father had taken a switch to him for something he’d done, or possibly hadn’t done, he’d never asked anyone for a hug. Not Rosemary or Grams or her. Something was definitely up. Her gaze met his.

“Lucky for you, I’m good at giving hugs.”

Still looking sad, he managed a crooked, half-smile. “I know.”

As she leaned into his arm, he tipped his head down, brushing her forehead with his lips. Tilting her head up, she touched her lips to his chin, then kissed her way to the corner of his mouth. Mustang hesitated but it didn’t take any more coaxing before his lips met hers full-on.

In mid-kiss, he pulled away. “Your grandmother.”

“She’s settled in front of her programs. We won’t see her for the rest of the night.”

He drew in a deep breath and then he was kissing her again. This time deeper and with more energy. He didn’t seem tired anymore. Mustang only stopped kissing her long enough to slip the sling off his neck. His hand came up to cup her breast. He ran a thumb over her nipple through the fabric of her dress. She felt it harden under his touch.

She groaned then broke away. “Is your arm okay?”

“Arm? What arm?” He lowered his head to trail kisses along her neck.

He pushed the top of her dress down with her bra and took her nipple between his lips, torturing her with his teeth and tongue.

Eyes closed, Sage leaned back against the pillows, memorizing every sensation that shot through her. His mouth sent electrical current straight through every part of her body. She wanted more.

Sage guided her hand on a path up Mustang’s thigh toward the long, hard bulge straining the zipper. She’d tasted him, felt what it was like to have the length of him in her mouth. She wanted it elsewhere.

She stroked him through his jeans and he moaned, letting her breast pop out of his mouth.

“We’re not going any further than this.” The warning sounded stern and definite, until she stroked him again, harder. He closed his eyes and drew in a shaky breath. “You are going to be the death of me, woman.”

“Mmm, but it will be a fun way to go.” Smiling, Sage took advantage of his weakening defenses. She felt for the tab of his zipper until his hand clamped down over hers.

“You are a determined little thing, aren’t you?” He chuckled.

It was nice to hear him laugh, even if he wasn’t letting her have her way. Maybe the subtle approach didn’t work on Mustang. Steeling her nerves, Sage gathered her courage. “I want you.”

“I want you too, Sage, but we can’t always have what we want.”

She tried to move her hand to touch him again, but he held her firmly.

“Why won’t you make love to me?”

He laughed. “Besides the fact your grandmother is in the next room?”

Sage felt the pout form on her lips. “But even at the lake you wouldn’t.”

Mustang drew in a deep breath. “I told you. I’m no good for you.”

“I don’t care.”

He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. “I know you don’t and I’m a bad enough man to take advantage of that.”

She scowled. “You haven’t taken advantage of me.” Not nearly as much as she would have liked him to.

“Yeah, I have. I’ve selfishly convinced myself that what we’re doing is okay as long as that’s as far as it goes.”

“Ah. The Bill-Clinton definition of sexual relations. As long as it’s not actual intercourse it doesn’t count.” She let out a snort as she finally understood Mustang’s plan and his reluctance to have sex with her.

He laughed. “Yeah, I guess something like that.”

Sage shook her head. “I hate to tell you, Mustang, but just because we haven’t, you know, doesn’t mean what we’ve done isn’t sex.”

The expression on his face grew serious.

“You’re right.” Mustang pulled his arm from around her shoulders. “That’s why we have to stop doing anything at all.”

Oh, no. That wasn’t the result she had been looking for. “What? No. That’s why we should just go for it and go all the way.”

“No.” Mustang shook his head.

“You can’t put the spilled milk back in the carton, Mustang. We’ve already done a whole bunch of things. Stopping now won’t change what happened.” She folded her arms and frowned.

He laughed, tapping her lips with his fingertip.

“You are adorable when you pout.” He sighed. “But you’re right about the milk. We sure have spilt a whole bunch. How about we just go back to doing what we were before?”

“Okay. For now.”

Hoping he was referring to the kissing and orgasms and not watching television, she inched her hand up his thigh. Laughing, he pulled her close again with one arm around her shoulder. "I can feel your hand on my zipper again, Little Bit. I told you no."

He'd caught her red-handed. "But we've already done that, so it's allowed."

Mustang lowered his voice. "Even so, I'm not going to sit here in your bedroom with my dick out and your grandmother in the living room."

"Fine. Be that way." Sage crossed her arms again.

Laughing, Mustang's hand moved down and began a journey up the inside of her bare leg. "Maybe I could make it up to you in some way."

"Maybe." She continued to scowl, but moved her legs wider as he dipped his finger beneath the edge of her panties. He moved, smooth and sure, right to where she needed him to be, zeroing in on her most sensitive spot.

Her moan caught in her throat and she closed her eyes. Sage raised her hips off the bed as he circled his finger. She pressed harder against his hand but it wasn't enough.

She let out a groan of frustration and then felt his breath warm against her face. "What's wrong, darlin'?"

"More."

Sometimes getting to heaven requires a trip through hell.

Beautiful Girl

© 2008 Shiloh Walker

Twelve years ago, it looked like Del Prescott had it all. The wealthy family, the car, the looks and charm, and the perfect boyfriend. Then, mysteriously, she disappeared to “study abroad”. Now she’s back, and it’s not merely to attend a high school reunion. She’s here to face her demons—and Blake, the man she has never stopped loving.

Blake Mitchell is a changed man, thanks to surviving twelve long years of difficulties that began after Del dropped out of his life. Now she’s back, and she’s nothing like the polished, stylish world traveler he imagined she’d be. There’s a darkness about her, and a grim expression in her eyes that says she’s prepared for fight or flight.

Blake’s concern for her breaks down the walls Del has built around her heart and she finally begins to heal from the abuse she suffered at the hands of her own family. But the betrayal goes deeper than either of them ever imagined—and it’s about to come back to haunt them.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language and violence.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Beautiful Girl:

Blake reached out and caught one of her hands, lifting it to his lips. “You look gorgeous.”

He kissed her hand, watching her from under the fringe of lashes. A soft blush stained her cheeks pink, her cheeks, her neck...lower. He found himself staring at the neckline of her dress and he tore his gaze away as he realized he was ogling her breasts. He wanted to do more than ogle. He wanted to peel the dress off and lick her all over. Instead, he gestured to the dance floor. “You know, I never got to dance with you at my senior prom. Why don’t you make it up to me now?”

The smile that curved her lips up hit in the chest with the force of sledgehammer.

“I’d love to.”

He led her out onto the dance floor and guided her hands, first one, then the other up to his shoulders. From the speakers, Garth Brooks sang a song about unanswered prayers. Blake wasn’t much for praying. Back before he’d stopped asking God for anything, though, this had been a regular prayer—having this woman back in his arms.

Maybe unanswered prayers weren’t the only thing to thank God for. At that moment, Blake was grateful for the answer to a prayer that had been a long time coming. Del moved against him awkwardly at first, her body tense, but bit by bit, she relaxed.

“So did you miss me at your senior prom?” she asked, cuddling against him just like she used to.

Lowering his head, he brushed a kiss against her cheek. He breathed in the soft, warm scent of her and managed to stifle his moan—just barely. His voice was hoarse as he told her, “Not a bit.”

Tipping her head back, she asked, “Not even a little?”

“Nope.” Then he smiled and confessed, “I didn’t go.” Cupping a hand over the back of her head, he eased her back against him. “Wasn’t interested.”

Through the thin silk of her dress, he could feel the heat of her body and it was killing him. He could feel the soft, sweet weight of her breasts, the flat planes of her belly. His left hand rested at the small of her back and he was almost painfully aware of the rounded curve of her ass. Nuzzling her neck, he murmured, “Did you miss your prom?”

Against his chest, Del smiled. “I missed half of my junior year and almost all of my senior year. The only prom I went to was your junior prom.”

Blake stroked a hand up her back. “Then we have quite a few dances to catch up, don’t we? You think you can close your eyes and pretend you’re wearing some sexy little formal number and I’ve got my James Bond attire on? We can pretend there’s some half-assed wedding-type band on the stage and we’re going to dance just a few dances before we slip out to find someplace to go neck.”

“Hmmm.” Her gaze dropped to his lips. “Necking, huh?”

“Yeah. Remember that junior prom? You had a pretty green dress on. Almost the same color as your eyes.”

She laughed. “That wasn’t the prom, sugar. It was the dinner dance at the country club.”

He shrugged. “Prom. Dinner dance. I had to wear a monkey suit for both of them, but it was worth it to see you. If the green dress was the dinner dance, then that pink number—it was the prom, right?”

Del nodded. The pink number, as Blake called it, had been a designer dress she’d bought from a boutique in Lexington. Her breath hitched a little as she remembered that night. He’d peeled her out of her dress and if a county sheriff hadn’t shown up, he would have had her out of the strapless bra and her panties before too long.

He cupped the back of her head, arching her head up to look at him. His lids were low, giving him a sleepy-eyed look as he murmured, “Yeah, that was prom, all right.” A wicked light entered his eyes. “That was the night I got to see the princess of Prescott wearing nothing but a lacy pink bra and lacy pink panties.”

She felt her face burn and knew she must be blushing to the roots of her hair. “That was the night you stole those pink lace panties and wouldn’t give them back.”

He grinned at her and bent down, pressing a quick, light kiss to her lips that set her blood to a slow boil. “Yeah...you’re right.” Pressing his lips to her ear, Blake murmured, “Can I tell you a secret...I still have them.”

A startled, embarrassed laugh escaped her. “You do not.” Then she pulled away and looked at him. “Do you?”

With a grin crooking his lips, he shrugged. “That’s kind of a pathetic thing to lie about, holding on to some pink silk panties for more than twelve years.” He brushed his fingers across her lower lip. “I also kept all the letters you sent me that summer while I was gone.” A harsh look tightened his face and he glanced around.

He grabbed her hand and guided her off the dance floor and out the open doors that led to the patio. It wasn’t much quieter out there and he led her past the groups of laughing people into the gardens just beyond. It was darker out there, away from the lights of the patio, and quieter. From there, the sounds of the music were distant and faint.

“I wish you would have said something, Dee—Del,” he corrected himself.

She pressed a fingertip to his lips. “You can call me whatever you want, Blake.”

He caught her hand in his wrist and pressed a kiss to her palm. “I kept those letters, Dee. I’ve read them so many times they’re practically falling apart. Why didn’t you say something?”

“I didn’t know what to say,” she responded. She gently tugged her hand away from his, then reached up, cupped his neck, tugging him closer. He dipped his head and she rose onto her toes, kissing him softly. “I wanted to say something. But I was too afraid. Too ashamed.”

Tears burned her eyes and Blake swore softly. Bending his head, he kissed her eyes. “Don’t cry,” he pleaded. “Please, don’t cry.”

He kissed her lips and she sighed into his mouth. He’d meant to make her feel better, that was all. She knew that. But it went from comforting to seductive in the span of heartbeats. His hands wrapped around her body, pulling her close and she groaned, arching into him. She wrapped her arms around his neck and clung tight, opening her mouth to his and whimpering with pleasure as he pushed his tongue into her mouth.

Against her breasts, she could feel that hard muscled wall of his chest, and the rapid beat of his heart. His hands roamed restlessly over her back and Del knew that he wanted more. Needed it—she could feel the hunger raging inside him and surprisingly, she felt it echoed in her own body. Damn it, she needed him.

There were nights she’d lain awake at night, unable to sleep, so sick and lonely inside it hurt. She’d think of him, remember who she’d been before her life had fallen apart. Happy, innocent—and his. She’d wished, so often, that she could go back to being that girl.

But she’d accepted a long time ago that there was no turning back the clock, that she and Blake just weren’t meant to be.

Now, though, she had a chance. Not at turning back the clock—She couldn’t go back to the innocent girl she’d been, but she could be his.



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