



SAM HAIN

# JACK

RED, HOT, & BLUE

CAT JOHNSON

The best way to heal a broken heart is to jump right back on the horse. So to speak...

*Red, Hot & Blue, Book 2*

After watching the girl he's crushed on for years fall for his best friend, the last thing special operative Jack Gordon wants is a vacation. If cooling his heels doesn't drive him crazy, doing it under his family's scrutiny will.

But once he's back home things get more than a little interesting. The new farm hand is cute, sexy—and his instincts tell him she's got something to hide. Luckily, he's got the skills and the backup to find out what.

Gordon Equine is the perfect place for Niccolina Campolini. The Gordons pay in room, board and cash. And they don't ask questions. Perfect for a girl on the run...until Jack shows up. Sexy as hell and far too inquisitive, Jack strikes sparks and suspicions that put both her body and her heart in danger.

Jack knows better than to trust a woman with as many shadows as Nicki, but the heat waves of their attraction are messing with his focus. And when her secrets catch up with her, he's not sure if he's protecting her from something, or protecting his family from her...

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

Warning: This book contains extremely stupid gangsters bearing guns, a bored team of special operatives looking for some action, and one Southern gentleman guaranteed to charm your panties off.

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Jack

*Cat Johnson*

# Dedication

To you, my readers.

# Chapter One

Jack Gordon leaned in, about to close the deal on what he hoped would be a mind-erasing kiss, because he could really stand to erase some memories right about now. He was just concentrating on not coughing from the overwhelming cloud of perfume that surrounded her, and now him too, when the blonde's hand on his chest stopped the downward descent of his head toward hers.

He moved back again, almost relieved she had stopped him. She was right. This kiss was probably a really bad idea. His heart still had the bruise from watching Carly, the woman he'd had a crush on for two years, fall hard for his best friend. That was in addition to the fact that Darlene, the current near recipient of his impending kiss, worked at Carly's bar as a cocktail waitress.

Darlene held one finger in the air. Sticking two fingers into her mouth, she pulled out a purple piece of chewing gum. He watched with fascination as she stuck the gum on the doorframe of the back entrance to the bar. Then she grabbed the neck of his T-shirt, yanked him to her and shoved her tongue nearly down his throat.

He was still recovering from that surprise attack when her hand reached down and grabbed, right through his jeans, what he considered to be his private property.

Jack jumped back, pulling his violated pelvis with him. "Whoa, there. Wait a minute, Darlene. What's the hurry?"

The cocktail waitress ran her hands up and down his chest. "But, Jackie. I've had my eye on you for years and you've never given me the time of day. Now that you've finally come to your senses, I'm not letting you get away."

He backed up, and she stepped closer, pinning him against the railing of the much too small staircase landing. Her mouth was just closing over his again when he heard someone very loudly and obviously clearing her throat. He pulled back and looked down to see Carly standing at the bottom of the short staircase.

"Darlene, are we already closed for the night?" Carly made a show of glancing at her watch.

Jack felt his face grow hot at being caught sucking face behind the building. Darlene didn't seem to care though. She answered Carly without blinking an eye. "No."

"Oh? Sorry, I assumed since my only cocktail waitress is out back making out with one of my customers we must be closed." Carly waited a beat. When Darlene made no move and still had yet to remove her hands from Jack's chest, she continued. "Darlene. Get inside and back to work."

Darlene rolled her eyes at her boss. “I’ll see you later,” she said with a wink at him before she sauntered back inside.

Jack’s gaze dropped to the ground. He was too embarrassed to look Carly in the eye. “Sorry about that.”

“It’s fine. From what I saw, you were the one being attacked.” She stepped up and wiped her thumb across his mouth. “Lipstick.”

“Yeah. I can take down a man twice my size in hand-to-hand combat, but they don’t teach us a defense for *that* kind of assault in training.” He rubbed his mouth and tried to ignore the knowledge that his cheeks were most likely as red as Darlene’s lipstick smeared all over his mouth. He dropped down and sat on the top step, running both hands over his face.

Carly sat next to him and bumped her shoulder playfully against his. “What’s wrong, Jack?”

Jack glanced sideways at her. “What makes you think something’s wrong?”

She shrugged. “You just don’t seem yourself lately and I never in a million years imagined Darlene was your type.”

He smiled sadly. She wasn’t. His type was sitting right next to him, and she belonged to his best friend, Trey. He changed the subject before that still-raw wound opened back up. “What are you doing back here at the bar on your night off? I thought you were over at Trey’s place.”

“I was. Then I remembered tomorrow is the first of the month and I forgot to pay the bills. Figured I better get back here and on my computer to do it quick. I guess I’m not used to having a man in my life. It gets in the way of things like paperwork sometimes.”

Jack raised a brow. Was she unhappy? And what if she was? Trey was head over heels for this girl. Jack could never pursue Carly knowing that. Could he? Against all logic, his heart began to beat faster as hope he shouldn’t—couldn’t—have started to creep into him.

“I heard Trey asked you to move in with him. He told me you said no.” Jack mentioned it casually, thinking a bit of investigation into this situation couldn’t hurt. Strictly for his friend, Trey’s sake, of course.

Elbows on knees, Carly rested her chin on one hand. She tilted her head toward him. “You heard right.”

Jack tried to control his heart rate. Even though he had buried them so deep it would take a backhoe to find them, Jack still had feelings for her. Could she possibly have feelings for him too? Could they both be denying what they felt because of Trey?

“Carly, I need to know something. The reason you won’t move in with him, it’s not because of me, is it?”

Her brow wrinkled with what? Pity? Great. She raised her hand and touched his cheek. “No, Jack.”

The pity part sucked, but besides that, her answer didn’t hurt him quite as badly as he’d feared it would. This was progress. There may be hope for his poor heart to recover yet. In fact, he felt a bit relieved.

He didn't know what the hell he would have done if she'd said yes. No man should have to choose between his best friend and a woman.

He grasped her hand and squeezed it. "Then what's the problem, darlin'?"

"It's me." She sighed deeply and laced her fingers through his. "I'm so damn afraid of being hurt again that I'm going to end up driving away a really good man."

Jack shook his head. "I wouldn't worry about that if I were you. A stampede couldn't drive Trey away. I know that for a fact. Just like I know he would never willingly hurt you."

She looked up at him with glassy eyes. "And what if he has no choice in the matter? What if he goes away on one of his mysterious assignments and just never comes home? I was with you guys on one of your missions, remember? I know what happened to your brother Jimmy. I know what could happen to Trey."

The fear of every military wife, mother and girlfriend. Jack breathed in deep and considered his answer. "Well, I reckon it will hurt just as bad if that happens whether you two are living together or not. The only thing you can do is try to live the life God gives you to the fullest with no regrets."

She smiled tearfully. "How'd you get so smart?"

Jack smiled back at her and wiped one tear from her cheek. "My brothers wouldn't agree with you, but thanks for the compliment, darlin'."

Still looking incredibly sad, Carly blew out a breath. "You're all so secretive. Would they even tell me if something did happen? Or would he just disappear and I'd never know why?"

Secrets were a part of military life, especially in the teams. Carly was correct in that. It added yet another difficulty to the already staggering challenge of trying to maintain a relationship.

"I'd never let you wonder. I'd tell you as much as I was allowed. I promise."

"Thank you." Eyes filled with tears now, she leaned over and hugged him. Feeling awkward being this close, he still couldn't resist dropping a light kiss on the top of her head. He breathed in the fresh scent of her shampoo. As he felt his heart tighten, he squeezed her once and then released her. When he raised his eyes, he saw Trey standing at the bottom of the stairs, his expression less than happy.

Carly glanced up at Trey and wiped her eyes quickly. "Hi. I'm sorry. I didn't even get upstairs to the computer yet to pay my bills. I'll do it right now. I'll be quick, I promise." She hopped up, planted a quick kiss on Trey's mouth and then jogged up the stairs to her apartment above the bar.

Trey pursed his lips and put one foot up on the bottom step. "So."

Jack raised a brow. "So?"

He could see some sort of inner turmoil written all over Trey's face.

"So I know it's crazy, but I'm jealous as hell of you sitting here talking with Carly."



Jack broke out laughing. Wasn't that ironic? Trey was the one who had Carly in his bed every night and he was jealous of Jack? "Trey. There's nothing going on. You know that. She loves you. She wouldn't cheat on you."

"I know that. We're at it so often she wouldn't physically have the energy to cheat on me. Sex is not the problem with our relationship."

Jack covered his face. This was way too much information.

He looked up through his hands as Trey continued, "I'm jealous she talks to you when she doesn't talk to me. Not about the important stuff anyway. Not even to give me a reason why she won't move in with me. It's damn frustrating."

"Ask her again."

"What?"

"Go upstairs and ask her to move in with you again. I think she might say yes."

Trey's eyes opened wide with hope, then he frowned suspiciously. "Why? What did she tell you?"

Jack shook his head and rose. He already seemed to be deep in between them, and he wasn't digging his own hole any deeper. He grabbed Trey by the shoulders and steered him in the direction of Carly's door. "Go."

Trey glanced back and then smiled. "Thanks, Jack. Oh, and by the way, you've got a red smudge right by your mouth."

That little reminder made up Jack's mind about what to do next. He had considered going back into the bar for another beer, but the thought of Darlene in hot pursuit sent him in the other direction, into the parking lot to where he'd parked.

Once safely in his car, he took a napkin out of the glove compartment. Frowning at the lipstick smudges he saw on his face reflected in the rearview mirror, he wiped hard. The damn stuff was nearly indelible, but after he finally got himself fairly clean, Jack started the car and headed for home. There he could wallow in his lonely misery in private.

At least Trey and Carly were happy. He'd work on getting himself happy later. While driving, Jack considered the best way to do that. Tomorrow, he'd go to the commander's office and ask to be assigned somewhere, anywhere. A little life-and-death action would do wonders to take his mind off Trey and Carly until the scar on his heart finally disappeared completely. Things had been too slow lately with no missions. Not even a damn field training exercise since the team had returned from Kosovo. Maybe the commander would have an assignment for him if he asked.

The hope for some excitement carried Jack through the night and halfway to the base the next morning. Then, during his drive in, his pager went off. The commander was calling the team in. He was finally about to get his wish for some action. Jack hit the accelerator harder. The Mustang's engine roared as Jack's spirits rose.

His good mood lasted all the way until he walked into the meeting room, where the stormy look on the commander's face was not at all encouraging.

Jack sat and silently waited with the others already in the room until the entire team arrived. Trey was the last one in, looking like he'd just rolled out of Carly's bed. Great. That was an image he didn't need burned into his brain. Scowling, Jack swallowed the bitter taste of envy burning the back of his throat.

Only when everyone was seated and quiet did the commander rise from his chair to speak. "Well, boys. The pencil-pushing heads-up-their-asses idiots from Central Command have come up with yet another scheme to mess up our lives. It seems we haven't been using enough of our time off. So these idiots have decided to institute a forced furlough period for our 'mental health'."

BB Dalton frowned. "Furlough, sir?"

"Forced time off, BB. Two weeks, to be exact."

There was a general grumbling among the team, except for Trey, who leaned forward and whispered to Jack. "I'll gladly take the time. You were right last night. Carly agreed to move in with me, and I want to get it done before she changes her mind."

Great. Not only was Jack not getting in on any action to take his mind off things, but he would probably end up using his two weeks of forced vacation helping Trey move Carly into his place. That was just what he needed, to carry a box full of her unmentionables into Trey's bedroom. He had to do something about this.

Jack raised his hand. "What about any assignments that come up, sir? Who will take care of them if we're all off?"

"Well, that will just teach those bastards, won't it? Central thinks they can stagger the different teams' furloughs and reassign anything that comes up. I think they're wrong."

Matt Coleman peered up from behind his ever-present laptop. "Obviously, sir. What if the target from Kosovo requests another face-to-face meeting with Trey? They can't reassign that. Not after the guy's already seen him on video and spoken to him on the phone."

Jack really didn't need to be reminded of Trey's last assignment.

"Agreed, Coleman. I'm actually hoping something exactly like that comes up to teach these assholes they should stick to pushing papers and leave the commanding to those who know what the hell they're doing. But until they learn, you boys are free for the next two weeks. Oh, and don't make yourselves too accessible. I want you all off the radar. Go home. Visit Mom. Take a transport to Fiji and soak up some sun. I don't care. Just let the guys up at Central know they really are up the creek without a paddle if they need us on short notice. Dismissed."

Trey looked like a kid on Christmas morning. "That's it then. I'm on my way to the grocery store to check the dumpster."

“The dumpster? Um, why?” Even in his miserable and distracted state, that still caught Jack’s attention.

“For some sturdy cardboard boxes to pack Carly’s things in. You wanna come?”

Since Trey was serious, and seriously happy about his little field trip to the dumpster in the North Carolina heat, Jack tried not to laugh in his face. “No, thanks though. Maybe I’ll meet you at the bar later.”

Once Trey had nodded his goodbye and sprinted out the door in search of used boxes, Jack knocked on the commander’s door. “Sir. May I speak with you?”

“Gordon. Come on in. I’ve been meaning to ask you how Jimmy’s doing.”

“Great, sir. He’s home with Mama recuperating, and she’s driving him batty.”

The commander smiled. “Good to hear. So, what can I do for you, Gordon? Why aren’t you already off enjoying your *furlough*?” He said the last word like it left a bad taste in his mouth.

“That’s what I want to speak to you about, sir. Is there any possibility of being assigned to another unit just for the two weeks?”

“May I ask why?”

“I...need to be busy, sir.”

The captain seemed to look deep inside him. The man had the uncanny ability to do that and used it too often for Jack’s liking. It was probably what made him a good leader, but it was still annoying.

“I know something’s up with you, Jack. I’m not as blind as everyone thinks I am.”

“No one thinks you’re blind, sir.” Sometimes they hoped he was, when they were breaking the rules. But unfortunately for them, they always found out he wasn’t.

“Yeah, sure. Anyway the problem is this is a direct order from higher up and there is no way around it. Go home, Jack. It’s a couple of hours drive to your hometown, right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Then go. Enjoy your mama’s sweet-potato pie you’re always bragging about. Spend time with Jimmy. Get away from your friend Williams, his girl and her damn bar. I think it will do you good.”

Jack tried not to let his surprise show. Were his feelings that transparent? He’d have to work on that. “Yes, sir. Thank you.”

“And, Jack...”

He paused at the door and looked back toward the commander.

“It wouldn’t have mattered if I *had* put you undercover with her in Kosovo. I saw them together. She was already half in love with him before they left for the mission.”

The commander wasn’t lying when he said he wasn’t blind. In fact, Jack was starting to wonder if he was psychic, or maybe just eavesdropped on their communications implants when they didn’t know. In any event, what the commander said about Carly and Trey was true.

Jack blew out a breath and embraced what he’d known for a while now. “Yes, sir. I know.”

## Chapter Two

Driving into the city limits of his hometown after being away for a while was bound to be a strange experience. The wind in his face glanced off the sunglasses he wore as he slowed to the local speed limit and took it all in.

Jack supposed it was to be expected, but a wave of nostalgia hit him hard as he passed the high school. Good memories there. He'd been MVP of the football team the year he graduated.

He slowed down cautiously at the hairpin turn where he'd lost control of his truck and wrecked it just two weeks after getting his driver's license. He smiled when he saw the parking area by the river where he'd lost something else with Mary Sue Barton.

But mingled with the usual hometown sense of belonging was the realization that he was a totally different person from the boy he had been when he'd left years before. He'd seen and done so much since that time when this little town had seemed like the center of the universe to him.

Maybe the commander had been right. This little furlough trip home would be good. There were no memories of Carly or Trey here like at the base, and it had been much too long since he'd seen his mama. There was an underlying homesickness living deep inside him he hadn't been aware of. It reared its ugly head just as he drove down the magnolia-lined drive to the house he'd been born in. He was so happy to see it that his eyes got a little misty.

Damn, when had he become such an emotional sissy boy? He pushed aside the thought that his emotional instability had begun just about when he'd fallen hard for Carly, which happened to be the same time his brother had been missing in Kosovo. Well, both of those things were over now. Time to move on. Perhaps two weeks mental-health leave would put everything in perspective and his emotions back on track.

Jack parked his convertible out by the barns, and then put up the roof before he turned off the engine. It could go from sunny to pouring rain in just minutes in the South. He'd learned the hard way not to leave his convertible top down. Not even to just run into the diner for a quick bite.

He grabbed his duffle bag out of the trunk and turned in the direction of the house, but a new colt running after its mother in the paddock just off the breeding stable caught his attention. Jack paused to admire it. That was one thing he missed about home besides his mama. The horses.

The mare came to the fence where Jack stood watching her. She was probably hoping for an apple or carrot. He had neither, so he rubbed her nose gently. He didn't recognize her, which made him realize he

had been away too long. There was a time when he knew every horse on this property. That time had passed.

“I don’t take too kindly to strangers handling my stock.”

Jack spun around at the sound of his younger brother’s voice and smiled. “Jared. Damn, little brother. Did you get bigger?”

All dimples, Jared grinned back. “Nah, I think you just shrunk some. Whatever you do all day at that super secret spy job of yours can’t build muscles the way unloading and stacking two hundred bales of hay can.”

“I told you, I’m not a spy.” Jack dumped his duffle on the ground and hugged his younger brother hard.

“Whatever.” Jared slapped him on the back before pulling away. He visually sized Jack up. “And I’m only three years younger than you, so get off the ‘little’ thing, will ya.”

Jack had first left for the service when Jared still seemed like a boy, but before him now was a man. They’d been eye level for years, but now Jared seemed as wide and broad as the barn they were standing next to.

Where Jack had followed in his older brother Jimmy’s footsteps and joined the service, Jared had stayed to run the breeding stables with Mama. If he hadn’t, there was no way Jack could have left the farm. As much as Jack loved the horses, Jared lived and breathed them. He had since before he could walk. It had been a chore just getting Jared to go to school most days. He hadn’t wanted to leave the stables. He’d sleep there too if a mare was close to foaling. It was because of Jared’s dedication that Jack didn’t feel guilty being away so much. Still, he should try and get home more often. It was obvious from the tightness in his chest he missed the place more than he realized.

Jack pushed the serious thoughts aside and hooked a boot heel on the bottom rail of the white painted fence. “This new mare’s a beauty and the colt looks like a real winner.”

Leaning on the fence, Jared mirrored Jack’s pose. “Yeah. Good stock, this one. Not that you know winners. If I remember right, you always bet the underdog.”

Jack smiled. Always betting the underdog had won him a few sizeable payoffs. He didn’t tend to remember all the times he lost.

“So what brings you home?” Jared turned and picked up Jack’s duffle for him. As Jack followed, Jared carried it toward the house.

“The big guys got the bright idea that we all need two weeks off to recharge or something. But I’ve been wanting to check up on Jimmy anyway. How is he?”

“Miserable. Old Doc Jackson won’t let him do much of anything, which is killing him. I keep finding him sneaking down here when Mama’s not looking.”

Jack laughed. “That sounds like Jimmy.”

Jared nodded. "Of course, his sudden interest in the horses might have something to do with the new hand I just hired. She's enough to heal any man. Quiet though, and real secretive. Can't get anything out of her, including where she's from. But believe me, she doesn't need to talk. Her looks do it for her. And she's real good with the horses. That's all that matters to me."

His brother's description of this new hire raised Jack's suspicions immediately. He'd have to meet this girl and figure out what she was hiding. He nearly tripped over his own feet as that thought made him realize a few things. First off, he'd been in special ops too long if he was suspicious of everyone, even a girl he'd never met. Second, he obviously wasn't over Carly enough yet if all he could think about was getting some information out of this supposedly sizzling hot girl instead of thinking about getting her to put out.

Jack followed Jared to the back kitchen door and sighed. Time, that's all it would take to move on. Just time. Then he caught a whiff of something incredible baking. Maybe time *and* some of his mama's pie.

Speaking of Mama... She screamed when she saw him and flung her arms around his neck. Then she pulled back and slapped him hard on his arm.

"Why didn't you call and say you were coming?" Then she hugged him again. "Sit down. The pie is just out of the oven."

He laughed. That was Mama. Not that she was really angry with him for not calling first. And even if she had been, she still would have fed him pie.

"Thanks, Mama. I've been dreaming of that pie all the way here. Where you got Jimmy stashed? I'm sure he's drooling by now. It would be just plain cruel not to share with him."

"Jimmy can fend for himself, thank you."

Jack looked around to see his older brother standing in the doorway, smiling and speaking of himself in the third person. His face still showed the yellow tinge of healing bruises, but he looked good. Way better than he had the last time Jack had seen him, half-dead on a backboard being strapped into a military transport heading for the hospital in Germany.

Jack hugged him hard. Too hard, he realized when Jimmy's breath whooshed out.

"Broken ribs." Jimmy winced but then tried to dismiss the obvious pain with a crooked grin.

Jack's eyes opened wide. "Jeez, Jimmy. I'm sorry."

Slapping Jack hard on the back, Jimmy proved he was okay. "No problem. Bones heal, little brother. We both know that. Now where's that pie I've been smelling for the last half hour?"

Jared had already grabbed forks and plates for them all and was sitting waiting for their mother to cut the pie. Jimmy walked with a slight limp to the table. He pulled out a chair and sat gingerly. Maybe he was still hurting more than he let on. But Jimmy was home and safe and that was good enough for now.

Jack sat between his two brothers at the same oak kitchen table he'd eaten at since he was born. While his mama served him her famous sweet-potato pie on his grandma's china plates, he decided the commander had been right. This might be just the thing he needed.

Nicki leaned against the fence, watching the newborn in the corral with his mother. She sighed and tried to pinpoint what she was feeling. Contentment, she decided. She finally felt semi-safe for the first time in a month of being on the run. Although she feared she would never be truly safe again. Not as long as the man she was hiding from still lived and breathed. At least she could allow herself to relax just a little bit here at the farm.

She was about as far from New York as she could get. Who would think to look for her buried away here in the Deep South on a small horse-breeding farm? Certainly not the thick-necked imbecile she'd run from. As long as the Gordon family accepted her without question, and continued to pay her in cash and give her a place to live, she was set. She could drop off the radar indefinitely.

The colt walked slowly up to the fence and nuzzled her hand. She ran her hand over him. "You are such a sweetie."

"Why thank you, darlin'."

The deep voice caused Nicki to startle. She let out a squeak of fear, spooking the colt. He took off running for his mother.

She turned to look at the stranger, heart pounding until she saw his face. He was so much like the other two Gordon brothers, right down to the way he stood and talked, she knew who he was immediately. Relieved and feeling a little silly for thinking her enemies could find her all the way out here, she smiled in greeting. "You must be Jack."

He raised a brow. "I must be. You know me, but who might you be, darlin'?"

Mmm, mmm. How she loved the way southern men sounded. So much nicer than the horrid accents she'd grown up around in New York. The accents from the five boroughs of New York City and Long Island made her cringe. But a southern man could practically make a girl's panties fall right off just by talking to her.

She nearly shook herself to regain her senses. This was no time to be thinking about romance, or sex, or whatever this feeling was that Jack caused. She was in hiding. Besides that, this particular Gordon man was only here temporarily from what she'd heard. Good thing too. He was much too yummy and tempting to have around for very long. She sure did like the way he called her darlin' though.

"I'm Nicki." She offered him her hand.

His handshake was warm and slow. But then, everything in the south seemed warm and slow. She imagined what else might be warm and slow with him...

“Nicki...?” He apparently wanted her to elaborate.

“Camp. Nicki Camp.” The guilt of the lie hit her hard. Did it show as obviously on her face as it felt on her tongue? If it did sound like a lie to him, the expression on Jack’s face didn’t show it.

He was still holding her hand in his big, strong one when he crooned, “Nice to meet you, Nicki Camp.”

Slightly shaky, she pulled her hand back and then glanced up at his face again. His hair was a bit more golden brown than his brothers’, and his hazel eyes had flecks of green and gold in them. *Stop it, Niccolina.* She was in no position to be checking this guy out. No matter how cute and charming he was.

“So what brings you here to Pigeon Hollow, Miss Nicki Camp? You don’t sound like a local girl.”

Nicki considered her answer carefully. She didn’t think she had a New York accent. As a teenager, she’d worked damn hard to make sure of that. It had been important to her then because she’d wanted to sound more sophisticated. It was even more important now. It was a matter of life and death that no one knew where she was from. But Jack was right. She didn’t sound like a native southerner. She didn’t think she could pull that off no matter how many times she watched *Gone with the Wind*.

“Oh, you know. Just seeing the country.” Yeah, that didn’t sound too lame.

He took one step closer, and she resisted the urge to take a step back as he towered over her.

“Well, I sure am glad you decided to settle here for a bit.” He smiled as his eyes twinkled.

Another few minutes of this onslaught of charm and Nicki didn’t know what she’d do. Thank goodness, Jared chose that moment to interrupt them. Otherwise, she may have swooned like in all those old movies where southern men made the belle of the ball faint.

“Steer clear of my help before you scare her away.” Jared shot Jack a stern look, and then smiled and winked in her direction.

She decided to make a joke of her own and get the hell out of there before Jack wedged her any farther between him and the fence. “Not much scares me, except my boss finding me loafing around not doing my job. I better get back to it.”

Jared laughed. “Yeah, I’m such a tough boss. But actually, one of the boys just told me old Bucky is laying down in the pasture and won’t get up. He said he saw Bucky limping for the last few days. I was just on my way out there if you want to come with me.”

“Old Bucky” was the right name for the animal. The horse had to be thirty-five if he was a day, but he was sweet. Nicki hated the thought that anything might be wrong with him. She could see by the look of concern on Jack’s face that he loved the horse as much as his brother did.

“I learned how to ride on Bucky.” Jack followed them as they started walking.

“We all did, even Jimmy. But he’s old now, Jack. We have to face the fact it may be time...” Jared let the sentence trail off. No one needed to be told what it may be time for. “I haven’t called the vet yet. I want to check him out for myself first.”



They reached the pasture and found Bucky lying right out in the middle under the hot sun. Nicki approached slowly, speaking softly to him. She saw him watching her out of the corner of his eye, but he didn't make a move to get up.

She leaned down and stroked his neck. "What's wrong, old guy?"

The whites of his eyes were showing. He wasn't happy about the three of them hovering over him, but he wasn't getting up either. Nicki dropped to her knees and laid her head on his belly. She noticed the two men were hanging back, just watching her. Well, if they were testing her to see if she knew what she was doing she had nothing to worry about. Her daddy had raised racehorses on a farm on Long Island. She'd spent every weekend and every summer in his barns or at the stalls at the racetrack. She didn't know much about a lot of things, but she knew horses.

Nicki pressed her ear against Bucky's side. She listened and then straightened up. "I'm hearing plenty of belly noises. It's not colic or an obstruction. Jared, you said the guys saw him limping?"

Jared nodded. Nicki started running her hands down each of Bucky's four legs, all the while under the watchful eyes of the three males: the two Gordon men and Bucky. She got to the last foot and stopped. She drew in a breath of relief. "His hoof has a hot spot. I'm betting it's an abscess. It hurts him to stand. That's why he's laying down and it would explain why he's lame."

She stood and brushed the dirt from the knees of her jeans. Jared walked over, bent and felt the hoof for himself. He shook his head. "I thought that new blacksmith cut his hooves too short." He patted Bucky's neck affectionately.

"Yeah, I didn't like the way he handled the horses either. The infection will have to work its way out, but at least you won't have to call the vet to put Bucky down."

Jared stood and smiled at her. "You're right about that, and you just earned yourself the rest of the day off."

Nicki felt herself blush at the attention. "Thanks, Jared. That's really not necessary." What would she do with a day off? It's not like she had friends around here. "I would like to see if we could get him up and in a stall though. He'll be more comfortable lying down out of the hot sun."

Nicki was trying to ignore the fact that Jack was standing just off to the side, watching her very closely. This Gordon was a bit too observant for her liking, cute or not.

As if he knew what she was thinking, he wandered closer. "You know your stuff. Where'd a northerner like you learn so much about horses?"

*Shit.*

"First of all, who said I was a northerner? Second, that was spoken like a true southerner. There are horses in other parts of the country, you know." With that, she went to try to coax Bucky into getting up.

It took all three of them, along with lots of shouting and butt slapping—Bucky’s butt, not hers—to get him up and moving slowly toward the barn. Once they settled him in the stall, he lay down on the fresh wood shavings.

Jared made one more offer for her to take the remainder of the day off, and this time she agreed. She needed to get away from Jack and his probing stare. She borrowed a truck and headed into town with the excuse that she had errands to run. Her main errand was to avoid Jack.

Jack watched thoughtfully as Nicki sped out of the drive in a Gordon Equine truck. She was a cute one, just like Jared had said, and she was also lying.

Oh, yeah, she knew horses all right. Her performance with Bucky had proven that. But she was obviously trying to prove herself and was definitely performing for them both.

She’d also successfully avoided answering any questions about who she was and where she was from. Her accent screamed northerner to him, most likely New York, although she tried to hide it. He would bet the farm that Nicki Camp was not her real name. She was not only a liar. She was a darn poor one at that. The way she hesitated before answering his questions. Her avoidance of direct eye contact. Her evasiveness. It all screamed deception. At least it did to Jack, who’d been trained to not only lie, but to spot lies from others.

The worst part was Jared didn’t seem to notice or care. Then a horrible thought struck him. “Jared, what do you think about this Nicki?”

Jared turned from where he had been setting up a fan to blow into Bucky’s stall so the flies wouldn’t bother him. “I think she knows her stuff and I’m damn lucky to have her. Why?”

“You, ah, into her? On a personal level, I mean.” It was bad enough to have someone who was so obviously hiding something working for his family and living on their property to boot. But if his little brother had a thing for her, it would be even worse when they found out what she was hiding.

Jared’s brow furrowed. “Why?”

Jack breathed out in exasperation. “Can’t you just answer a question?”

“Can’t you?” Jared glared back at him.

Jack bit the side of his mouth to stop from laying into his annoying little brother. He regrouped. No use getting Jared upset now. Jack could investigate this girl on his own, then tell Jared about it later when he found out what was what.

He smiled at his brother and lied through his teeth. “A man doesn’t steal his brother’s girl. I just need to know where you stand when it comes to Nicki. I’m going to be here for two weeks. A man can make a lot of progress in that time.”

Jared broke out into a wide grin. “Well, it’s about time you showed some interest in a nice girl for a change. After some of those cheerleaders you dated back in high school... Thank God, you didn’t marry

any of them. No, I'm not interested in Nicki that way. I decided the day I hired her that it would be wrong to date an employee. Besides, there's a little filly in town I've been um...*seeing* lately." He wagged his eyebrows suggestively.

Jack smiled, genuinely happy for his brother and his "filly", but even more relieved that Jared hadn't fallen for Nicki. "What about Jimmy? You said he's sneaking down here a lot."

Jared shrugged. "You'll have to ask him about that. Could be he just has cabin fever from being cooped up for so long. Go for it with Nicki if you want to. You've got my blessing. Just don't do anything that'll make her quit on me. She's too good to lose." He turned back to Bucky and shook his head. "To think I was ready to put him down and it's only an abscess."

Jack nodded, grateful about that too, but even more resolved to get to the bottom of this as soon as possible. He stepped out of the barn while his brother stayed inside talking to one of the men. Outside and out of earshot, he pulled out his cell phone.

Scrolling through his contact list, Jack found the name of the one man most likely to deliver the answers he needed, and fast. He hit the button and listened to the ringing and the eventual "Hello."

"Hey, Matt. It's Jack. What's up?"

Matt replied with a groan. "I'm bored as hell on this damn furlough, that's what's up. What about you?"

"I'm home at my mama's place and I think I've got something that's right up your alley, oh god of the computer world."

"Lay it on me, brother." He could hear Matt's excitement.

"I need everything you can find out about a new employee my brother hired, but I gotta warn you, I don't have much."

"I love a challenge. Give me what you've got."

Jack fed him what information he could, and texted him the photo he'd snapped of Nicki while she'd been busy with Bucky. Cell phones with built-in cameras came in handy at times like this.

"How long do you think it'll take?" he asked Matt before hanging up.

He could hear clicking as Matt typed furiously on his ever-present computer keyboard. "Well, I can tell you right now you're right about her name. There's no Nicki Camp. It's fake. I don't know how long. The photo should help, and the fact that you're pretty sure she's originally from the northeast. I'll get back to you when I have something."

"Great. Thanks, Matt. I really appreciate this."

"Thank *you*. You may have saved me from going insane during my mental-health leave."

Jack laughed. He and Matt said goodbye and hung up.

He knew Matt. They'd worked together for a long time. If there was something to be found on this girl, Matt would find it, no matter how deep he had to dig.

With that thought in mind, Jack headed inside the house to feel out his older brother about his feelings regarding Nicki. A pretty young thing like her would be real tempting to a man recovering from what Jimmy had gone through. Jack really hoped he was wrong about her as he knocked on Jimmy's open bedroom door.

"So, little brother, you've got the hots for Nicki?"

Jack stopped dead in the doorway and stared at Jimmy. "What...?"

From his position on the bed, Jimmy grinned. He waved his cell phone at Jack. "Jared just called me from the barn."

"Great." Jack rolled his eyes. "I'm glad to see you two are putting modern technology to such good use. You're like a couple of old washwomen gossiping. I guess you're too busy, so I'll leave."

Turning toward the hall, Jack pretended he was going to leave.

"Don't you dare go."

Jack paused in the doorway until he heard Jimmy add, "I'm sorry. I'm just bored and you and Nicki together would put a little excitement in my sad life."

He pivoted back with an exaggerated sigh.

"Oh, all right." He took a few steps into the room and sat in the chair next to the bed. Jimmy lay on top of the covers with a book open in his lap. His left foot was propped up on a pillow. That was the ankle that had been broken by the bastard terrorists while they'd had Jimmy in captivity. The memory of that twisted Jack's gut. He glanced at Jimmy's face and the fading bruises there angered him all over again. "How much longer did the doc say he wants you laid up like this?"

"No idea. It has something to do with my spleen." Jimmy shook his head. "The broken bones, I can handle. The bruises, who cares? But this internal stuff...there's nothing I can do about that but just wait it out, I guess."

Jack nodded and brought the subject back around to Nicki, on his terms this time. "While you're waiting it out, aren't you a little tempted by Nicki yourself?"

Jimmy's room overlooked the barns. He'd have a great view right here from his bed of Nicki's jean-clad ass sauntering around all day long as she did her chores.

Jimmy shrugged. "I guess I haven't been feeling all that romantic lately. It's gonna take a bit of time before I'm back in the saddle again. Besides, she's a bit on the young side for me."

Being cooped up obviously hadn't done Jimmy's mental health any good. Jack made his own mental note to speak with the doc himself privately and see just how bad Jimmy really was. Maybe it would be all right to take him out for a drive or something.

What the hell does a spleen do anyway? Jack didn't know, but damaged spleen or not, Jimmy had managed to get himself into the kitchen for pie today. Hopefully that little trip hadn't done him any harm. Mama's pie was strong motivation, no matter what the consequences.

“So, little brother, go for it. I give you my blessing with Nicki.” Jimmy interrupted Jack’s thoughts on pie and mysterious organs.

“That’s what Jared said.” Jack held in a sigh. He knew his brothers well enough to know he’d now have both of them hell-bent on fixing him up with a girl he was only pretending to like so he could secretly investigate her. And he’d only been home a few hours.

The next two weeks should be mighty interesting.

## Chapter Three

Nicki spent two days trying to avoid Jack. The man seemed to be everywhere. Not that he wasn't adorable, because he was, and sexy. Hell, he practically melted her every time he came up, actually snuck up, behind her with a *hey, darlin'*. The problem was his constant questions. The other two Gordon brothers had been easy to lie to. They took her and her story at face value. Not Jack. He must have made a thousand subtle inquiries, all purred out in that voice of his.

Maybe he was only interested in learning more about her because he liked her. That would be nice, welcome attention at any other time in her life, but not now. Now secrecy was the only thing keeping her safe. Bad timing, that's what this was. If they had met at any other time, in any other situation, she would have flirted her butt off with him.

Flirting. Maybe that was still a good idea. If she could blind him with her sex appeal, maybe he'd stop prying into her past. She glanced down at her mucking boots, sunken ankle-high in mud and manure, and nearly laughed at herself. Sex appeal. Yeah, right. She dragged the heavy hose behind her and refilled the water tub in one of the far paddocks where the stallions were turned out. She doubted Jack would follow her all the way out here and she could use a few minutes away from his prodding.

"Hey, Nicki." Hearing the male voice suddenly close behind her made her jump. Turning, she was happy to see it was Jared, not Jack.

"So, now that I've got you alone, what do ya think of my brother?"

Happy until she'd heard what Jared had to say.

*Here we go.* "You know I like Jimmy."

Jared grinned at her. "You're a smart one, Nick, and you know very well I wasn't talking 'bout Jimmy. What do you think of our Jack?"

"I think he's not going to be around here long enough for me to think anything about him. That's what I think, Jared." She hoped that would end this line of questioning. Jeez. She'd thought she was safe with Jared. Who knew he was a matchmaker?

Then she had a thought. What if Jack put Jared up to this because he really did have a thing for her? Maybe he wasn't suspicious, just interested. Hmm. She didn't quite know what to do with that idea.

Jared continued to watch her much too closely as she devoted more than the necessary attention to filling the tub. She finally couldn't take it any longer. "Was there something else, Jared, besides your interest in my opinion of your brothers?"

He smiled broader and shook his head. “Nah. That was pretty much it. Oh, and Bucky’s abscess broke through. He’s up and standing in the stall again.”

Thank goodness he was back to talking about work. This she could handle. “That’s great. I’ll turn him out into the paddock when I’m done here.”

“Do that later. The new mare I bought is in heat and ready to be bred. I’m bringing the lucky stud over to her now. Since she’s an unknown, I wouldn’t mind an extra hand around in case she’s a kicker.”

Nicki raised a brow. “So you *are* here for something besides bothering me?”

He grinned while slipping open the gate. “Yup, but bothering you is so much fun I decided to do that too.”

Jared hooked the lead rope she hadn’t noticed him holding before up to a beautiful black Arabian’s halter and led him out of the paddock. Nicki secured the gate behind them, then shut off the water to the hose.

When she caught up with him and the stallion, Jared glanced sideways at her. “So, you like Jimmy more than Jack then.”

She couldn’t help but laugh at his persistence. “Whose side are you on, anyway? Jack’s or Jimmy’s?”

“I’m on my own side. I figure if I can marry you off to one of my two brothers, you’ll never quit on me *and* I won’t have to pay you anymore.”

Nicki laughed again. She didn’t have plans to marry anyone at the moment, but she did like it here. She only hoped she could stick around for a while.

Jack had been helping out in the barns since his arrival home for two reasons. First, he truly did miss being around the horses when he was away. Second, and most important, it was where Nicki usually could be found. Matt was taking longer to find information on her than Jack had expected. While waiting for Matt’s call—and boy, did he wish Matt would hurry—Jack figured he could do a little digging himself.

He’d have to be more careful though. He’d noticed Nicki was starting to avoid him. He was pushing too hard. Maybe he’d lost his touch when it came to flirting. Usually girls fell at his feet. Carly hadn’t, but that had been a special situation.

Sighing, Jack was about to start feeling sorry for himself again when he spotted Nicki and Jared walking across the field with the stud horse Jared had been going on and on about for days. Jack’s heart kicked into high gear at the sight of Nicki. Damn, she looked good in those jeans. It was a darn shame she was most likely hiding something.

“Hey, darlin’,” he greeted her when they were close enough.

Jack noticed Jared smirk at him as he continued into the paddock with the stallion. When Nicki went to follow him in, Jack stepped forward and stopped her with a hand on her arm. “Stay out here where it’s safe. There’s plenty of men in there already. Jared doesn’t need you too.”

She didn't seem to like that one bit. Her brow furrowed as she shook his hand off her arm. "He asked me to help."

Inside the paddock, Jared handed the stallion off to two farm hands. "Jack's right, Nicki. Stay there for now and I'll call you if I need you."

She screwed up her face in a pout and leaned against the rail, leaving a good few feet between herself and Jack. He closed that distance fast enough and leaned next to her. She pretended not to notice but she did. He saw her body tense.

He watched her watching the procedure wide-eyed as a second lead rope was hooked to the antsy stallion's halter. Two men held him now as the horse, who knew something was up, started to rear. The mare was still locked up in the barn, but it was very obvious the stud horse could smell her from out here. He was, understandably, becoming more spirited, not to mention visibly excited.

"You've never seen a mare bred before, have you?" Jack guessed.

She didn't look at him, but shook her head. "We always used frozen transported sperm and artificial insemination on our mares. We never had to deal with the stallion."

Was she blushing as she stared at the impressive stud?

"And who's *we*, darlin'?" This was a clue he could give Matt. She must have worked on a breeding farm if she knew about artificial insemination and transported sperm.

She glanced at him quickly, then looked away just as fast, shaking her head. "It was a tiny farm. I'm sure you've never heard of it."

"What's the name? Maybe I have."

"It was so tiny, it didn't have a name. Just an old farmer with a few mares, that's all." She dismissed his question with a wave of the hand that was meant, he supposed, to look casual.

Another lie. At ten thousand bucks a pop minimum, there was no way some old farmer was using artificial insemination to breed his mares.

He didn't have time to pursue this latest fallacy, since just then Jared brought the mare out on a lead, but kept her on the other side of the fence. He walked her past the stallion, who was doing what he could to get to her in spite of the two farmhands holding him.

Nicki had definitely not been lying when she said she'd never seen breeding done the old-fashioned way before. Her eyes were bugging out of her head.

"What Jared is doing is kind of introducing the mare to the stallion. That's also how you can tell if she's really in heat. It's called teasing. If she is in heat and is going to accept him, she'll show for him." Jack began narrating the action for Nicki when, as if on cue, the mare sashayed her butt in front of the stallion and lifted her tail right in his face. He watched Nicki blush darker as he continued, "Just like that."

Jared brought the mare into the paddock.



“He’s going to keep a hold on her so he can pull her away if necessary. Since he’s never bred her before, he’s not sure she won’t kick at the stallion instead of stand for him. But he’s already pulled off her rear shoes just in case. If she kicks, she won’t do as much damage.” Jack glanced down at Nicki. “She could also strike out forward, toward the person holding her on the lead rope, so Jared has to watch out for himself too. That’s why neither of us wanted you in there until you’re used to the procedure.”

She glanced up at him and then quickly toward to the action in the paddock. It was starting to really heat up. He watched Nicki’s eyes drop to the ground as the stallion mounted the mare and began thrusting. It was over quick enough, but Nicki looked like she was ready to crawl into a hole by the time it was done. Jack had been watching horses being bred for as long as he could remember and never thought twice about it. Meanwhile, Nicki reacted as if she were watching the filming of a porno movie.

The two men brought the stallion back out to the far paddock, Jared led the mare back to her stall and it was all over. Nicki mumbled something about having to get Bucky and left while Jack allowed himself a snicker at her expense. She was a strange mix of city girl and horsewoman....and where the hell was Matt with his answers about her past?

Jack pulled out his cell and dialed. Maybe if he kept pestering Matt, he’d get working a little harder on this.

Matt answered the phone immediately. “I was just picking up the phone to call you. I’ve got her.”

Jack’s heart pounded faster.

“Niccolina Campolini. Born in Brooklyn, New York, to Nicholas Campolini, who trains racehorses on Long Island.”

Jack let out a long, slow whistle. Little old farmer, his ass. He’d heard of the Campolinis. They trained at Belmont racetrack and had a few champions come out of their stables.

“And get this,” Matt continued. “It seems someone filed a missing persons report on her about a month back. A classmate of Niccolina’s called the police after she missed her final for an equine vet class she was taking at night school. When the police questioned her father, he told them she was fine. He said she was away on some family emergency, so they dropped it.”

“So what’s going on?” Jack’s stomach clenched. “Do you think he was messing around with his own daughter and she had to run away and change her name?”

“I don’t know, Jack. But from what you’ve said about the fake name and her not answering any questions, she doesn’t want to be found by anyone.”

“That rotten, cowardly, son of a bitch.”

“Jack, I recognize that sound in your voice. Do not even think of going to New York and dealing out justice yourself. First of all, you don’t know that he messed around with her. Second, this Campolini’s got mob ties. That may not mean much to a southern boy like you, but take it from a New Yorker. You don’t want to mess with those guys.”

When Jack didn't answer immediately, Matt chimed back in. "Jack. I want you to promise me you won't do anything."

"All right. Thanks for the info, Matt."

"Why am I not convinced?"

"Because you're a suspicious bastard?"

Matt laughed. "No, because I know you. Let me make you a deal. You don't do anything on your own without talking to me first. If you're going to do something stupid, you might need backup."

Jack smiled. "You really are bored."

"No. Well, yes, but I'm more interested in preventing you from starting a mob war."

Jack laughed. "All right, I promise. That good enough?"

"It'll have to do. I'm checking in with you every day and I think I'll be calling you on your mama's house phone from now on. Make sure you're actually where you say you are."

Matt, his friend and teammate, didn't trust him? Jack scowled at that thought. "You don't have my mama's house phone number."

"Jack, really, you insult me. I'll talk to you tomorrow. Say hi to your mama and Jimmy for me." Then the line went dead.

Matt was right. Finding a listed phone number was no challenge for anyone, but particularly not for Matt the computer god. Jack shook his head and walked toward the house. He needed a few minutes and a cold glass of sweet tea to mull over this latest information. Nicki's lies took on a whole new color now that he'd learned more about her. Suddenly, she went from wearing a black hat to a white one in his mind.

As his natural instinct to protect her kicked in strong, the questions remained. How did he protect her without letting her know he'd investigated her? And would she even let him help her?

## Chapter Four

It was hot. Not just normal hot like it got at home in New York in the summer, but beastly, sauna kind of hot. Nicki breathed out, but her own breath even seemed to raise the temperature.

She leaned against a fence in the shade and wiped the back of her hand over her forehead, ignoring the fact that she'd probably just left a lovely dirt streak there.

"How're you doing?"

Speaking of hot... Jack had managed to sneak up without her hearing him once again. It's like the guy walked on air.

"It's hot," she complained bad-naturedly.

Jack laughed. "Oh, darlin', by the calendar it's not even summer yet. What're you going to do then?"

"Die. Or get a job in the frozen-food section of the food store in town."

He shook his head vigorously. "Nope. I can't let you do that. Jared would kill me if I let you quit over a little heat."

"A little heat?" She stared at him in shock over that understatement. He didn't look uncomfortably warm at all. Thin blood, she decided.

He reached out and grabbed her hand. "Come on. I know how to cool you off."

"Where are we going?" It's not that she didn't trust him. Over the last few days, they'd settled on a kind of unspoken truce. He'd stopped with the questions, and she'd stopped avoiding him. But since this heat wave had hit overnight, she honestly was too hot to move. "Is it far?"

He laughed again. "You're not going to melt from the heat. I promise."

They crossed the field beneath the brutally hot sun until they were beneath the shade of a stand of trees. She was happy to be out of the heat of the sun again and even happier when they broke out through the trees and she spotted Jack's destination. He stopped in front of a big, beautiful and, most important, cool-looking pond shaded by a giant willow tree.

She took another step forward. "It's like heaven."

He smiled down at her. "And it's fed by an underground spring, so it's always cold."

That information nearly sent her running into the water fully clothed. She turned to thank him when she noticed Jack stripping off his shirt while kicking off his barn boots.

"I don't have a suit on."

He grinned. "Neither do I, but don't worry. We're not formal around here, darlin'."

“You mean...” Surely he didn’t intend to jump in naked. Did he?

He paused with his hand on the top button of his jeans and looked at her strangely. “Don’t tell me you’ve never been skinny dipping before?”

“Okay, I won’t tell you.” She kicked at the dirt self-consciously and tried not to look at how the sun glinted off the sheen of sweat on his bare chest. She swallowed hard and forced her gaze back up to his face.

He paused, then bent and retrieved his discarded shirt and boots. “That’s fine. I’ll give you some privacy.” He turned back toward the way they’d come when she put one hand on his arm and stopped him.

“No. That’s not fair. You’re just as uncomfortable as I am.” She hesitated. “So, you do this a lot? Skinny dip?”

“I was swimming in this pond naked before I could walk.”

“But with girls?”

He shrugged. “Just another rite of passage. It’s really not a big deal around here. Now going to the local drive-in for a first date with a girl, *that’s* a big deal.”

She looked wistfully at the water and could practically feel it against her skin, cooling her right down to the core.

“Okay.”

He smiled. “Good for you, darlin’. You really haven’t lived ’til you’ve jumped into a cool pond on a hot day.”

She kicked off her own incredibly hot rubber mucking boots and paused with her hands on her jeans’ button as Jack pulled his pants off. While she stood frozen in shock, he was before her in nothing but his boxers. “Um, Jack?”

He raised a brow. “Yeah?”

“You are a gentleman, aren’t you?”

He laughed, a sound that started deep in his chest and kind of bubbled out. “Darlin’, I’m southern.” And with that he pulled off the boxers and she got quite a view of his white ass cheeks as he ran for the pond. With a whoop, he dove in headfirst, naked.

She couldn’t help but be jealous at the sheer abandon of the move. While he was swimming as sleekly as an eel under the water—she certainly hoped there were no actual eels in there—she stripped naked and dove in herself.

Nicki broke the surface and shook the wet hair out of her eyes. “This is amazing.”

He swam circles around her. “Told ya’ so. When are you gonna start trusting me, darlin’?”

She treaded water and spun to follow his motion as he moved slowly around her. “I do trust you.”

Her words had come out softly but he’d obviously heard them. He stopped swimming and just bobbed. “You do?”

Uh-oh. When had this gotten serious? “Of course. You’ve never given me reason not to. Your entire family has taken me in as one of their own. Why wouldn’t I trust you?”

He looked like he wanted to say something more, but instead he just shrugged and started swimming around her again.

“Um, Jack?”

“Yeah?”

“How do we dry off so we can get dressed again?” Tight jeans and wet skin did not mix well.

He stopped swimming and grinned. “Sunshine, darlin’. Sunshine.”

“Oh.” She was afraid of that.

Jack gazed at the twinkling, star-filled sky. He never saw night skies like this back at the base. Too close to the city lights. Only in the country did you see stars like these.

He glanced up and noticed the light on in Nicki’s room over the barn. He thought back to their little dip in the pond and how they’d lain next to each other in the grass after. Being a gentleman, he’d kept his gaze on the sky. Well, most of the time. He smiled at the memory of the expanse of smooth pale skin he’d glimpsed when she’d bent to retrieve her clothing off the grass. He didn’t get views like *that* back at the base either.

That image of her had Jack walking in the direction of the barn. He climbed the exterior stairs to her door and knocked, then realized he probably should identify himself too. “It’s Jack, darlin’.”

If she was on the run, which it was now pretty clear she was, a knock on her door in the dark would scare the hell out of her. He heard her throw the locks. She opened the door wearing nothing but a tank top and short shorts. Her black wavy hair was damp. She must have just showered, unless she’d snuck back to the pond for another dip. He liked the thought of that.

“Hey, Jack.”

He peeked past her into the room and saw she had a fan in the window. At least that would keep it from getting beastly hot in here, but it was still not cool by any stretch of the imagination. “I’ve come to take you out, darlin’. The show starts at the drive-in in a few minutes.”

Jack still hadn’t decided what to do about her situation back in New York. Hell, he hadn’t even determined exactly what that situation was. For now though, the least he could do was try to make her life here a little bit happier. It seemed to be working. She broke into a gorgeous smile that made her blue eyes twinkle.

He’d made up his mind. She was safe for now working here. He would most likely tell his brother about what he’d learned before he left. Jared would make sure her identity stayed secret while keeping an eye out for her.

"I thought you said taking a girl to the drive-in for the first time was a very big deal around here." She planted a fist on each of her hips in challenge. She was a beauty, even when she was pretending to frown at him, like she was doing now.

He grinned and kicked at the doormat. "Yeah, well I meant it *was*, back when I was sixteen."

"Oh? So it's not a big deal now?" She put on a pretty pout. Was she flirting with him? He hoped so.

Jack reached out and lifted her chin. "You caught me lying. It is still a big deal to me and if you say no, I'll be crushed. So what do you say?"

Her gaze dropped shyly. "Okay, but I have to get changed first."

He shook his head and laughed. "It's the drive-in in Pigeon Hollow. Believe me, you're overdressed."

She frowned. He doubted she'd ever gone anywhere in New York in cut-offs and a tank top with no bra underneath, he noted happily.

"All right. I'll just put on some shoes." She shoved her feet into flip-flops, then grabbed her purse from the hook beside the door. Nicki finally met his gaze. "So, um, is the drive-in the place where you went as a teenager to...you know?"

Jack laughed. "No." When she looked disappointed, he added, "The drive-in is for the warm-up. I save the 'you know' for later at Lover's Lane by the river."

Nicki's eyes opened wide at that answer and her cheeks turned a lovely shade of pink. "Oh."

Looping an arm around her shoulders as they walked down the stairs and toward his convertible, he considered his plan of action. Maybe he should put the roof up when they got to the drive-in. He may need the privacy later.

Nicki glanced sideways at Jack and then back at the larger-than-life outdoor movie screen. She'd never been to a drive-in before, and it was nothing like the eleven-movie multiplex theaters back home in New York.

Jack glanced down at her and laid an arm around the back of her seat. "Having a good time?"

She nodded and then had to stifle a yawn. Shocked at her own appalling lack of manners, she covered her mouth. "I'm so sorry. It's no reflection on you or the movie. I'm just a little tired." And wasn't that the biggest understatement of the century? She hadn't really slept in a month, not since she'd been on the run.

"That's all right, darlin'. You want to go home?"

She shook her head. "No. I'm enjoying being out. I'll be fine."

He pulled her closer until her head leaned against his strong shoulder. "Rest for a bit."

Like she'd actually be able to rest this close to him. Since their little trip to Jack's pond, every time she closed her eyes or even let her mind wander, visions of a naked Jack swam through her head.

Even so, she must have fallen asleep because the next thing she was conscious of was Jack kissing her softly on the forehead. "Nicki?"

She opened her eyes. "I'm sorry. I fell asleep. Is it over?" She saw the screen filled with an ad for the snack bar.

He smiled, his face very close to hers. "The first one is over. It's a double feature, but the second movie is some horror flick. I would have just driven us home, but you're on my right arm and I need it to shift."

While apologizing, she started to move away, but his arm around her shoulder stopped her from going too far.

"Don't apologize, darlin'. I liked it. You're so cute while you sleep. I hated to wake you up."

He leaned in a little closer, or maybe she did. Either way, she suddenly found herself in the position where there was a choice to be made. Pull back and save herself from the temptation, or move forward and succumb to what she'd been thinking about so much lately, pretty much non-stop. Jack. His sexy, low voice washing over her body. His thick southern drawl that almost seemed to cling to her like molasses. Jack, the man whose mouth hovered temptingly above hers.

Jack truly was a southern gentleman. Their lips were just a breath apart, but he didn't move in. It was as if he waited for her to move first. But if the look in his eyes was any indication, he wanted this kiss as much as she did.

Licking her lips, Nicki dropped her gaze briefly to his mouth, leaned in and then lost herself in his kiss. She heard his quick intake of breath before his other hand moved to cradle the back of her head. Her hands found their way up his rock-hard chest, and then down the V to his narrow waist and hips.

He nibbled gently on her lower lip before tilting her head and sliding his tongue inside her mouth. She melted. Eyes closed, a small sound of pleasure escaped her throat. At hearing the sound, he leaned back and smiled down at her. Thankfully, he didn't stay away long, but moved to suck on her earlobe. His breath in her ear sent tingles straight to her core.

She wanted more from him. She wanted his shirt off, her hands on him. His hands on her. His mouth all over her. Then she remembered they were in a convertible in a public place.

She drew in a shaky deep breath and released it with his name. "Jack."

He pulled back enough to look at her with heavy-lidded eyes. "Yeah, darlin'?"

Swallowing hard, she gathered her nerve. "Take me to Lover's Lane."

His eyes opened wider for a second, then he had the car started and them on the road so fast she wasn't quite sure how he'd done it.

Nicki tried not to let herself get nervous on the drive to this Lover's Lane. Jack left his hand on her knee, only removing it occasionally to shift gears. All too soon, they were at the river. He pulled the car beneath a tree, put it into park and pulled up the emergency brake.

Before he turned off the car, Nicki touched his hand. "Put the roof up, Jack." Her heart was beating faster as he did what she asked. Then he turned in his seat and faced her. And that's when she attacked him.

There was a jumble of limbs, interrupted by car parts, punctuated by the bruising of limbs by car parts. Somehow they both ended up in the passenger seat with Jack on the bottom and Nicki in his lap facing him. She found herself panting as he pulled up her tank top and closed his mouth over her breast.

Arching her back, she pulled the tank off over her head, not an easy task since her head was pressed against the cloth roof. She shuddered as his teeth scraped over her nipple. Jack's warm hands ran up and down her skin. They were so big that his fingers reached her spine while his thumbs brushed the sides of her breasts.

He released one heavily teased nipple and moved to the other. He worked it until she pulled back and lowered her mouth to his again. Her tongue found his as his hands strayed down to cup her ass.

She broke the kiss long enough to yank his T-shirt over his head, then went back to kissing him as she ran her hands over his bare chest. The same chest she'd kept picturing ever since their swim. It felt even better than it looked.

His tongue plunged in and out of her mouth. She wished he were plunging something else in and out of her. Pressing closer, she tried to get as much of her skin against his as she could, in spite of the heat and the fact that they were both becoming slick with sweat.

He pulled her pelvis closer to his and she could feel how aroused he was through his jeans. Shameless now and well past the point of no return, she ground herself against him and moaned. Jack's breath was coming fast. His bulge pressed against the seam in her cut-off denim shorts and rubbed her just right until she began to tremble.

"Jack." She rotated her hips harder and faster against him. "I'm going to..."

Nicki couldn't finish the sentence as the orgasm rocked her.

"Me too," he breathed against her neck. A groan came from Jack as he clutched her tightly to him.

They came together, clinging to each other, both still half-dressed.

When they finally both stopped shaking, she let her full weight collapse heavily against him and tried to catch her breath. He held her tightly, still panting himself.

Then they heard the tap-tap on the windshield.



## Chapter Five

Two things hadn't happened to Jack since he was a teenager. The first, being with a girl and coming before he even got his pants off. The second, getting busted by the cops, half-naked in a car with said girl. And yet here he was, in his thirties and reliving his teens.

He managed to find his T-shirt and drape it over Nicki's bare breasts before the sheriff leaned down and peered into the open passenger window. The cops had always been considerate about giving you a few seconds to cover up.

"Jack Gordon. Is that you?" The flashlight blinded him, but he recognized the voice immediately.

Frowning, he shielded his eyes against the glare with his hand. "Bobby Barton? Is that you? A sheriff? You got to be kidding me."

The light switched off and Bobby leaned a forearm in the open window. "Deputy sheriff actually. What're you doing back here? You home for good?"

Jack overcame the surreal feeling of having a conversation with an old school chum while holding a topless Nicki in his lap, all the while ignoring his own now warm and wet boxer shorts. "Nah, I'm home on furlough for two weeks."

Bobby nodded. "How's your mama? And Jared and Jimmy? I heard Jimmy got a bit banged up."

"Yeah, he's recovering. Everybody's fine." Enough with the chit-chat. Jack had a girl in his lap, but it was as if Bobby hadn't noticed.

"So, who's your friend?"

Or maybe he had.

"Um, this is Nicki Camp. Jared hired her to help around the farm. She's great with the horses." Yeah, this wasn't too weird at all.

Bobby extended his hand. "Nice to meet ya, Nicki."

Nicki had to clutch his T-shirt to her chest with her left hand while pulling back from Jack far enough to shake Bobby's hand with her right. "You too."

Jack had to smile. This girl was a trooper.

"It was good seeing you again, Jack. I'll radio to the other car and tell them to give you two some privacy." Bobby—thank God—was finally wrapping this up.

"Thanks, Bobby, but I think we're about to head home." Privacy or not, Jack wasn't about to continue anything with Nicki here.

Bobby nodded. "All right, then. Night, Jack. Night, Nicki."

Nicki nodded back as Jack answered. "Night, Bobby."

When the sheriff's car pulled away, Jack let out a long, slow breath and dared to look at Nicki's face. He felt her shaking and realized she was silently laughing, and then not so silently. Jack joined her until he had to wipe his eyes.

He finally caught his breath enough to speak. "I was going to ask if you were all right, but I guess you are."

With the back of one hand, Nicki swiped at her own eyes. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be laughing, but this is the craziest thing that has happened to me in a long time."

He ran a hand up and down the bare skin of her back. "Don't apologize. It's good to see you laugh. But besides good old Bobby, are you okay with...you know...what happened between us?"

She nodded, more serious now. "Yeah. That was pretty crazy too, but I'm fine. Are you?"

"Besides performing like an untried youth—" and really needing to get out of his boxers, "—yeah, I'm fine. I usually do have a bit more finesse. I promise."

"You'll have to show me some time." She smiled and leaned in, planting a quick, light kiss on his lips.

With that, just like when he was a teenager, Jack was hard as a rock again. "Let's get out of here."

It was time to go home and hopefully get naked someplace private so they could get to know each other better.

They pulled their shirts back on. Jack moved Nicki over slightly and slid back into the driver's seat.

Jack started the engine and put a little distance between them and Lover's Lane. It had been a hell of a good night, but he was old enough now to appreciate the qualities of a good mattress and the privacy of four walls and a door with a lock. He was just about to turn onto the road that led to his mama's farm, where he hoped to find all those things and more in Nicki's apartment, when his cell phone rang.

It had to be after twenty-three-hundred hours. The only calls that came that late at night were bad ones. He pulled the cell out of the console and saw Jimmy's name on the read-out. His heart nearly stopped. What the hell had happened at home?

As fast as he could safely manage it, Jack steered to the side of the road, shifted into neutral and yanked up the emergency break. He flipped open the phone. "Jimmy, what's wrong?"

"Now, Jack, it could be nothing, but my sixth sense kicked in and I wanted to run it by you right away."

He finally breathed again. At least the barn wasn't on fire or something, but Jimmy's sixth sense was rarely wrong. He'd been on too many missions with Jimmy to ignore his brother's gut feelings, so this wasn't good news.

"Okay. What's the situation?"

“Two thick-necked bruisers in cheap suits stopped by about an hour ago. They spoke like those mob guys in the *Godfather* movies. They were asking about Nicki.”

Jack’s training kicked in and he started formulating a plan while he turned off the car lights. While cradling the phone on one shoulder, he pulled the car back onto the road. He’d drive Nicki out of state if he had to, but he could not take her home now. “What exactly did you say to them?”

“Nothing. I told them I’d never heard of her. Something’s not right. Who the hell comes knocking unannounced this late? Besides that, I didn’t like the vibe I got from them. I’ve been out of action for a little while, but I’m not stupid. I know Nicki’s hiding something. I figured she was just running from a bad relationship, but if these guys are any indication, she’s in big trouble and needs help.”

“I’m on it. I’m heading for the old hunting cabin. I’ll call Matt and Trey. They’re both still at the base. They can be here in a few hours if they drive fast enough. You get a hold of Jared and explain things. And see if you can get Mama out of the house without scaring her. Send her to Aunt Lydia’s for the next few days.”

Then Jack remembered the physical state his brother was still in. “Go with her, Jimmy.”

“No way.” Jimmy sounded adamant.

That was the exact response Jack expected from him, but he was prepared for it. “Jimmy, they’re probably watching the house. I don’t want Mama driving alone and getting picked up by them.” It was true, but also a way of keeping Jimmy out of harm’s way.

He heard Jimmy huff out a big breath. “All right. Keep in touch.”

“Take your gun with you,” Jack reminded.

Jimmy snorted. “Are you kidding me? I strapped on my holster the moment I closed the door on those guys. I only wish I had my flak jacket here.”

Jack was feeling pretty naked himself without a flak jacket as he wrapped up the call with Jimmy.

Nicki was practically vibrating next to him in the car in obvious reaction to the half of the conversation she’d heard. Taking a deep breath, Jack forced himself to ignore her and stay focused on the task at hand. He hit the speed dial for Matt while driving. His teammate answered after the first ring. You could always count on Matt to be wired for technology at any time of day or night.

“Jack. What’s happening?” Matt’s voice came through the phone sounding wide awake in spite of the late hour.

“It’s come to a head. Two men came to the farm looking for her. We’re safe for now, but I need you and Trey down here ASAP.” They discussed logistics for a minute, then Jack ended the call. This time of night Trey and Matt could break a few speed limits and hopefully cut the drive time down to an hour and a half, barring any radar-happy state troopers.

Two New York mobsters against two, soon to be four, highly trained special operatives. He liked the odds. What he didn't like was the risk for collateral damage. Nicki, his mama and both his brothers were in danger.

He glanced sideways at Nicki. She was watching him wide-eyed. He sensed her trembling increase.

"Jack," she whispered. "What's happening?"

"That's what I need you to tell me, darlin'. All of it."

*Please let it not be too bad.* He said a quick prayer for her sake as well as his own. He'd let himself get attached to her, and he didn't think his heart could stand another heartbreak soon.

Nicki's stomach clenched. She feared she might lose it out the car window as Jack sped down the dark road with the lights turned off. It wasn't his driving making her feel ill. There was enough moonlight for him to see the road, and he seemed to know where he was going. It was that they had found her somehow. She was no longer safe.

Things were bad. Very bad. And not fifteen minutes ago she had been happy, *very* happy, in his arms.

Time to tell the truth, before her lies got her and Jack's entire family killed. She took a deep breath to steady her stomach.

"My real name is Niccolina Campolini. My father breeds and trains racehorses near Belmont Park in Long Island. You've heard of Belmont. It's the third leg in the Triple Crown after the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness Stakes."

He glanced quickly at her like she was an imbecile, so she continued. "Sorry, of course you've heard of it. Anyway, this guy was putting pressure on my father to throw a race. Tell the jockey to pull up, make the horse lame...whatever. He didn't care, as long as this horse didn't win the race. My father was pretty tired of being a pawn for these guys. He'd owed them some money, but he'd paid it all back plus a ridiculous amount of interest. In his mind, his obligation was done, but they kept demanding favors. He decided to end it there and then and his horse won."

"And they weren't very happy with him." Jack was only guessing, but it seemed like a logical assumption.

"No, they weren't. They took me as collateral so he would have to do what they said and to teach him a lesson for crossing them." Her voice started to shake.

Jack took his eyes off the road long enough to look at her for a few seconds. He put one hand on her knee and squeezed. "Go on, darlin'. Tell me what happened."

In the dark, she could see the firm, angry set of his jaw as he waited for her to finish. "The head guy had always liked me, so he decided he would make me his woman, then he would have control over my father forever."

She glanced at him. This next part was going to be very hard to say, especially to him. Particularly now, after what had happened between them. “I was under constant guard until one night when he summoned me to his bedroom. The arrogant bastard dismissed the guards so we were alone.”

Her heart pounded just remembering it. Jack squeezed her leg again. “Don’t, darlin’. It doesn’t matter what you had to do. You got away. That’s all that matters.”

She shook her head. “No, I need to tell you this. I went along with him until he was...in a vulnerable position. Then I bit him, hard, down there.” Cringing, Nicki remembered too vividly the metallic taste of his blood in her mouth.

The car jerked a bit as Jack’s surprised gaze flew to her. She continued with the sordid tale. “He didn’t even scream for the guards. I guess he was in so much pain. So I grabbed the brass lamp next to the bed and smashed him over the head. I don’t know if I killed him. I didn’t care. I somehow slipped out of the house unnoticed. I ran until I couldn’t run anymore. I stole a woman’s purse at the bus station. I’m not proud of that, but I had nothing with me and I was desperate. I bought a ticket with cash on the next bus heading away from New York.”

They turned onto an unpaved, very bumpy and winding path, not even a road. Jack flipped on the lights again and slowed the car to a crawl. She assumed they were nearing their destination as she finished her confession. “I ended up in Pigeon Hollow with nothing but the clothes on my back and a few dollars in a stolen purse. I heard your brother in the diner saying he wanted to hire more help on his horse farm. Here I am.” She shrugged with the completion of the story.

Jack brought the car to a stop behind an old cabin that looked like it had seen better days. She doubted they’d be found here and that was good enough for her.

He yanked up the brake and pulled her into his arms. “I’m so sorry, darlin’. But you did good. You were very brave.”

“But they found me somehow and now your family is in danger because of me. I should have told you all the truth sooner. I shouldn’t have stayed in one place for so long. I meant to keep moving, but everyone was so nice. Then I met you...”

He pulled back and held her face while he looked at her. “Shhh. Regrets do nobody any good. I’m glad you stayed. I can help you.”

She was about to protest again when he silenced her with one finger on her lips. “Listen to me now. This is what I do. Those guys don’t stand a chance. Trust me.”

Her eyes filled with tears. “I do.”

He smiled and kissed her quickly before opening the car door. Then he led them into the dim, musty interior of the cabin.

## Chapter Six

“So let me get this straight. The one guy’s name is Paulie the Pudge and the other guy’s name is Vinny Don’t Know?” Trey’s gaze moved from Jack to Matt.

Jack looked up from checking his cell phone for an update from Jimmy and nodded. “That’s what Nicki said.”

Another call to Jimmy had provided Jack with enough of a physical description of the two men for Nicki to identify them. Now Jack’s quickly assembled team had names to go with the bad guys chasing Nicki, but he still didn’t know how they’d finally located her at his family’s farm.

“Yeah, but you got to say it like you’re from Brooklyn. Vinny Don’ Kno’,” Matt, being from New York himself, explained. He’d arrived at the cabin toting his laptop plus a bunch of other electronics and was currently tapping away on the keyboard.

Trey let out a long breath. “This is like a really bad movie.”

Jack glanced over to make sure Nicki was still asleep on the cot in the corner of the cabin. Poor thing was exhausted. He didn’t blame her. She was sleeping so soundly she was snoring lightly. “Matt, what have you got on Vinny and Paulie’s boss? This Tony guy.”

“It looks like he recently dropped out of sight. After what you told me Nicki did to him, I’m sure he crawled away to lick his wounds in private. No mobster would want that story to leak out.”

Jack cringed at the thought of the wounds Nicki had inflicted on Tony. Not that the bastard didn’t deserve that plus more.

Matt continued. “But she definitely didn’t kill him. Word would have got out if he’d died. He’s too big for it not to.”

*Too big.* Great. Why couldn’t Nicki’s father have pissed off a small-time gangster instead? “So we can’t just make him disappear is what you’re saying.”

“As much as we’d all like to, no. He’d be missed. But I have an idea on that front. If you agree, Jack. This is your deal.” Matt waited a beat.

Jack accepted his role as leader of this operation by nodding once. “What’ve you got?”

“I’ve hacked into this guy’s accounts. Ridiculously easy. I thought mobsters would have better tech guys, but apparently not.” Matt shook his head.

“They hire guys like Paulie the Pudge and Vinny Don’ Kno’ and you think they’re going to have state-of-the-art internet security?” Trey raised a brow.

“Okay, you got me there. Anyway, he’s got accounts everywhere. A paper trail of dirty money and how he launders it a mile wide. All I have to do is drop an anonymous tip to the IRS and FBI and this guy is going away on tax evasion and racketeering for life.”

Jack frowned. “I don’t want anything that can be linked back to Nicki. Those guys can do damage even while behind bars.”

“There’s no way he can trace it to Nicki or her father. In fact, I can bounce it from his computers so it looks like one of his own men turned on him.” Matt’s face glowed with satisfaction in the lamplight.

Jack considered Matt’s solution. Non-violent. It couldn’t be traced to Nicki and it would give this guy what he deserved—life in prison. “Do it.”

Matt rubbed his hands together, bent lower over the screen and started tapping away again just as Jack’s cell phone vibrated in his pocket.

He pulled it out and saw Jimmy’s name on the display. Jack flipped it open. “Jimmy, where are you and Mama?”

“I pulled some strings with a friend and she and Aunt Lydia are spending the next few days on a riverboat, wining, dining and gambling. I figured they’d be safer in a public place than at Aunt Lydia’s house way off in the country. Jared and the boys are hiding in the barn, well armed, in case these idiots get any ideas about getting to us by hurting the horses or burning us out.”

Jeez. Jack hadn’t even considered the safety of the animals in his worry about Nicki and his family. “Good. Where are you?”

“I’m driving around town with the two New York idiots tailing me. I lost them on the way to drop off Mama, then I picked them up again on the road in front of the farm.”

“What?” Jack ran a hand through his hair in frustration. Why couldn’t Jimmy just do as he asked? “Why aren’t you staying with Jared or Mama where it’s safe?”

“And miss all the excitement? Hell no. Besides, these guys are fun to mess with. They really think I haven’t made them. So far they’ve followed me to the drive-up ATM, the McDonald’s drive-thru, and we even pulled up outside the late show at the drive-in theater and watched the movie for a bit. What do you want me to do with them now?”

Jack rolled his eyes. These gangsters did seem too dimwitted to be much of a danger against a trained operative, but he wasn’t willing to risk anyone by betting on that. On top of that, Jimmy was still injured. The doctor would definitely not approve of this latest activity. “You’re supposed to be resting, not acting as bait for two mobsters.”

Jimmy laughed. “Yeah. Two of the stupidest mobsters on earth, so don’t worry. Just tell me what to do. Are you guys set up? Do you want me to lead them there to the cabin?”

He shook his head. “I’d rather not do this at the cabin. Nicki’s here.”

Trey touched his arm to get his attention. “If we don’t do this here, we’ll have to either split up or leave Nicki here alone.”

Jack breathed in deep. He definitely wanted to be in on bringing down these two, but there was no way he was going too far from Nicki’s side either. He had no choice but to agree to Jimmy’s plan. “All right. Give us ten minutes and then lead them here.”

“Great! See you then.” He could almost hear his brother’s excitement through the cell phone.

Trey was laying the spare weapons and flak jacket he’d brought for Jack out on the table when Matt closed his laptop triumphantly. “Done. One mobster down, two to go.” He secured the Velcro closures on his own bulletproof vest and then began checking his weapon. “And for once, I get to be in on the real action instead of stuck in a van full of computers somewhere.”

Jack shook his head. “So glad I could help entertain you, Matt. Now here’s the plan—we set up outside in the trees. We take these two down before they ever hit the front porch or set foot near Nicki.”

“Take them down how, Jack? What are we aiming to end up with, bodies or prisoners?”

Good question. What sort of force was warranted here? Usually this kind of decision was the commander’s, or Central Command’s. Jack was just considering that when the sound of tires on the road had all three of their heads snapping up.

“Car,” Trey announced needlessly.

Jack killed the kerosene lamp, grabbed the handgun and stood behind the door. “That was *not* ten minutes and that doesn’t sound anything like my brother’s truck.”

Trey closed his flak jacket and cocked a brow at Matt, whose weapon was already out. “You remember how to shoot that thing?”

Matt scowled, but didn’t have time to answer because Nicki chose that moment to sit straight up. “Jack? What’s happening?”

“Darlin’, I need you to get up, go into the bathroom and lay down in the bathtub. Don’t move until I come and get you. Okay?”

Jack slowly edged his head to the window. He saw Bobby Barton getting out of his sheriff’s car. He hadn’t seen Bobby in years, and yet here he was for the second time this night.

Jack called out the window to him. “Damn it, Bobby. Are you following me? Get your butt inside right this minute. We have a situation here.”

Bobby opened the cabin door and blinked in the darkness. “I got a call that a strange car was driving on the private road toward your cabin.”

His eyes must have eventually gotten used to the dim moonlight that filtered into the cabin through the windows, because he looked from one black-clad figure to the next to the last. “Uh, Jack? What’s going on here? You’re not a member of one of those radical groups that wants to blow up the government or something, are you?”



Jack would have laughed at that if he weren't so wired. "No, Bobby. You know I'm military. We work *for* the government, not against it."

"I know that, Jack. But you have to admit this looks pretty strange." Bobby eyed Matt and Trey suspiciously.

Jack couldn't blame Bobby for being doubtful. It wasn't like this was an official operation by any stretch of the imagination. "Bobby, this is Matt and Trey. They're two of my teammates from the task force. That's all I can tell you except that we've got two New York mobsters out to hurt Nicki. Right now they're following Jimmy and he's leading them here so we can ambush them."

And since the local law was now on the scene, they all had the answer to Trey's previous question. They'd have to take these guys alive. The only remaining question was what the hell were they going to do then? This wasn't a government-sanctioned mission, but it involved four special operatives that needed to stay off the radar and out of the local papers.

"Hey, Bobby. Wouldn't it look really good for your career if you took these two bad guys down all on your own?"

Bobby glanced again at the three. "Yeah, Jack, it would."

Jack smiled as a plan presented itself...then all hell broke loose.

The sound of screeching tires cut through the night as Jimmy's truck came around the corner on two wheels. A big, black rent-a-car appeared not far behind. Of course, since this was by no means a road and they were in the marshlands, the rent-a-car didn't stand a chance. The driver strayed too far off the path and soon the car's tires were spinning in the mud, giving Jimmy just enough time to jump from his truck and dive into the front door of the cabin.

"Damn it, Jimmy. Be careful of your spleen," Jack yelled when Jimmy hit the floor with a tuck and roll.

"I'm fine. Hey, Trey, Matt. Bobby, how the hell are ya?" Jimmy brushed himself off and pulled his weapon from the ankle holster.

"Good, Jimmy. You?" Bobby responded.

"Never felt better." Jimmy grinned.

Jack smothered a groan. "Everyone all caught up? Now who's got a plan? Because idiot number one and idiot number two just got out of the car."

The two mobsters ducked behind the hood of their vehicle until only the tops of their heads and their overly big and showy guns were visible. He couldn't help but think what a perfect target they would make for a sniper's gun. The idiots didn't even know enough to stay covered.

Through the night air, Jack heard their conversation clearly since they didn't seem to know enough to keep their voices down either.

"What do we do now?" one asked.

“Tell them we want Nicki,” the other voice answered.

“But, Paulie, how do we know she’s in there?”

“Use your brain, Vin. They must have her stashed in the shack. Why else would that hick from the farm come here after we showed up asking about her?”

“Hick? Hmph.” Jimmy’s unhappy sounding whisper filled the cabin.

Jack shushed him and strained to hear Vinnie’s reply, though he liked them calling his family’s cabin a shack about as little as Jimmy liked being called a hick.

“Yeah, I guess you’re right, Paulie. Okay. I’ll ask them to send her out.”

“No, I’ll ask. You’ll probably fuck it up.” At that point in the conversation, Paulie actually stood, leaving himself totally exposed. “Hey! Give us the girl and nobody gets hurt.”

Jack sighed as their opponents’ idiocy seemed to increase. His finger on the trigger itched as Jack longed to teach the man a lesson, but he restrained himself and answered their insane request instead. “Sure, hold on a sec. I’ll go get her for you.”

Vinnie stood too as Paulie yelled back. “Okay.”

Jack glanced over his shoulder at his team. “What assholes. Do they really think we’re going to do that?”

Jimmy laughed. “I told you they’re not the sharpest tools in the shed.”

Bobby took a step forward. “I’m going to have to inform them I’m in here, Jack. I’m an officer of the law.”

“Go ahead. They obviously didn’t notice the big white sheriff’s car with the flashing lights on top, so you better say something.” Jack couldn’t help but let out a laugh himself. This situation was absolutely surreal.

“Hey, do you have the cops in there with you?” the skinny one asked.

“Hmm. I guess they’re not quite as dumb as I thought.” Jack shook his head at the sheer stupidity of their question. “What do you think?” he yelled back.

“I don’ kno’. You tell me.”

Jack heard Trey outright laughing at Vinny Don’ Kno’s response.

Matt let out a huff of air. “They’re too dumb for me to even shoot at. It wouldn’t be a fair fight.”

Bobby moved closer to the door. “I’m a local deputy sheriff. If you lay down your weapons and surrender peacefully, we’ll go easy on you. But if you insist on firing upon an officer of the law, I will fire back. This is fair warning.” Bobby sounded very official. Much more impressive than he used to be years ago. The memory of Bobby bent over, throwing up after a beer chugging contest at a graduation party crossed Jack’s mind.

There was silence for a moment, so Jack risked a quick peek out the window. “Uh-oh. The two idiots are whispering to each other about something.”

“Jack?” Nicki was silhouetted in the doorway of the bathroom.

“Get down, darlin’. This isn’t over yet.”

“But—”

“Please,” Jack pleaded. “I promise I’ll get you when it’s over.”

Nicki planted both hands on her hips and Jack suspected she wasn’t going without a fight.

“Jack, I’ve been dealing with these guys for a lot longer than you have.”

“I understand that, but you’re not in New York anymore. You’re in my town now. Let me handle this.”

She hesitated with one hand poised on the doorknob. “Promise me you won’t get hurt?”

Hurt by these guys? Jack laughed. “I promise. Now go back inside and close the door.”

Finally she nodded and did as he asked.

“Is that the looker you were parked naked with by the river tonight?” Bobby whispered after Nicki disappeared back into the bathroom.

Jack cringed and could only picture the reaction on the faces of Trey, Matt and especially Jimmy.

Jimmy muttered a curse beneath his breath. “Now I owe Jared twenty bucks. He said you’d have her naked before week’s end.”

“We weren’t naked.” Jack ground his teeth.

“Not totally, but from the waist up you both were,” Bobby clarified.

“That might not count. Maybe I didn’t lose after all.” Jimmy sounded hopeful.

Feeling spiteful, Jack decided to burst his brother’s bubble. “You lose anyway. We went skinny dipping in the pond today.” He smiled in victory at Jimmy’s second and even more foul curse in the dark.

Trey moved closer to him. “What’s going on with you and Nicki?”

Good question. “We’ll talk when this is all over with.” Maybe by then, Jack would have an answer.

Matt glanced out the window, then pulled back. “We appear to be at a standoff, boys.”

“I could call for backup,” Bobby suggested.

“This is gonna be hard enough to explain. I mean, all of us, here and armed.” Jack nodded toward his teammates.

Bobby sighed. “You’re right.”

“Jack, I have an idea.” It seemed Nicki was determined not to stay safe in the tub as he’d asked her to. She came out, squatted and crab-walked her way across the floor to him.

At least she hadn’t stood in front of the window and made herself a nice target. He let out a patient sigh. “Okay, darlin’. What’s your idea?”

“I want to talk to them.”

“You aren’t going outside.” His voice came out sounding a bit more feral than he expected.

“I’ll yell from here.”

He let out another breath of frustration. "All right. Give it a try if you think it will help." He supposed it couldn't hurt.

"Hey, guys!" She raised her voice and yelled from the floor.

"Nicki, baby. Come on out. Tony misses you," Paulie the Pudge called back.

"Yeah, I really miss him too, but I got to tell you something. I wouldn't feel right if I didn't."

Was Nicki's New York accent getting stronger just from talking to these two?

"What's that, Nicki baby?" Paulie asked. Jack was happy to see they were responding well to her.

"Remember a few months back, when Tony was screwing around with Johnny Bag-o-Donuts's wife? Well, when Johnny found out and accused Tony, Tony said it was you she was fooling around with. So Johnny told your wife and that's why she left you."

"Johnny Bag-o-Donuts?" Jack whispered to Nicki.

She shrugged. "He likes donuts."

"What? My bitch wife got the house and half my money in that settlement. You sure about this, Nicki?"

"Paulie, I was Tony's hostage for a week. You hear things. Guards forget you're there and talk. I'm sure."

"Son of a bitch. But what am I supposed to do about this? I can't cross Tony. He'd kill me."

"You could both drive away from here and forget you ever found me," Nicki suggested. "You may not be able to confront him, but you sure don't want to make him happy by bringing me back, do you?"

Jack heard Paulie ask Vinny, "What do you think?"

"I don't know," Vinny answered predictably.

"This is worse than a really bad movie," Matt mumbled from a dark corner.

Paulie and Vinny seemed to reach some decision and he yelled, "If we forget we saw you, will this here deputy forget he saw us?"

Jack raised a brow in question at Bobby.

Bobby shook his head and laughed. "I wouldn't know how to explain this in a report anyway." He moved closer to the window. "You drive straight out of here, cross my county line and don't look back, and I'll pretend I never saw you."

Paulie nodded. "Deal. Stay safe, Nicki baby. Tony's not going to stop looking for you, you know. You really pissed him off."

"Thanks, guys. You stay safe too."

There were a few minutes of flying mud and spinning tires during which Jack feared they'd all have to go out and give the two idiots a push. Finally the rent-a-car fishtailed its way back onto the path and down the road.

Jack slid down the wall and sank gratefully onto the floor next to Nicki. "It's over, darlin'."

“No it’s not, Jack. They’re right. He’ll never stop looking for me. I’ll be on the run for the rest of my life. I’ll have to leave here...” Her voice broke.

Matt lit the kerosene lamp and the room came into view again.

“I don’t think he’s going to have time to bother with you, Nicki. I think he’ll be a little busy soon.” He grinned wide.

Jack slid his weapon back into its holster. That left his hand free to grab Nicki’s. “We took care of him, Nick. Rather, Matt did. Either way, he’s likely going to be locked up for a very long time.”

“Really?” He could almost see the weight lift from her shoulders.

He squeezed her hand reassuringly. “Really. Let’s go home.”

## Chapter Seven

The sun hadn't been up for more than an hour, but Jack was already slumped at the kitchen table, both hands wrapped around a now cold cup of coffee.

"I have to say, this is a pretty pitiful sight."

He looked up and saw Trey standing in the kitchen doorway, looking far too chipper for Jack's taste. "Don't start with me, Trey."

"You're really going to let her fly back to New York and never see her again?"

"That's not how we left it. We agreed we'd stay in touch." Jack glanced at the clock on the stove. By now, Nicki's plane had already taken off. His chest tightened as he pictured her speeding farther away from him with every passing minute.

So much of yesterday had been spent recovering from the events of the night before that he felt like they'd barely had any time together. Nicki had immediately gotten in touch with her father to tell him she was all right. The man had high blood pressure and she was afraid the stress of the last few weeks had taken a toll on his health. She wanted to see for herself he was okay, and let him see she was fine too, so she'd found a direct flight to New York that left at oh-six-hundred this morning.

Jack had offered to get up early and drive her to the airport, but she'd insisted she could take a cab. It was probably better this way. Get the goodbyes over with in private.

Jack rubbed at the strange pain that had been in his chest since the night before.

Trey watched him closely. "What's wrong with your chest?"

"Heartburn or something." He pushed the mug away. "It's probably the coffee."

"Your mother's coffee is as good as her pie, so I doubt it." Trey pulled out a chair and straddled it backward, a stupid-looking grin on his face. "What color are Nicki's eyes?"

Jack frowned. "What the hell kind of question is that?"

"Just answer it."

"Deep blue, like the color of the ocean when you see it from really high up in a plane. Why?"

"Ha! I knew you'd know." Trey broke out into a broad smile. "You love her."

Jack rolled his eyes. "Just because I know what color her eyes are doesn't mean I'm in love with her."

"Does your 'heartburn' hurt worse every time you think about her leaving?"

Jack rubbed his chest again, wondering why his discomfort was making Trey so happy. "Yeah, but so what? It's a coincidence."

Trey shook his head. “You once told me I was either too stupid or too stubborn to realize I was in love with Carly. Which one are you, Jack? Are you too stupid or too stubborn to admit you have feelings for Nicki?”

Jack’s breath caught in his throat as the truth of his own words being turned back on him hit hard. He buried his face in both hands. “Both, I guess. But how is this going to work? She’s a New York City girl. She’s not going to move down here to Pigeon Hollow and continue to shovel manure for my brother now that she’s not in hiding anymore.”

Trey raised a brow. “Go after her, Jack. Hop on a transport. You’ll be there before nightfall. I’m betting after all that’s happened recently, she’s had enough of New York.”

“Who’s had enough of New York?” Jared wandered in the back door and joined the conversation uninvited. He walked over to pour himself a cup of coffee.

“Nicki. She flew back home to New York this morning to be with her father,” Trey answered for him.

Jared took a sip and shook his head. “No, she didn’t. She’s outside in the yard right now.”

Jack sat up straight at that information. Had Nicki missed her flight? As horrible as it seemed to be happy she’d missed it, he was still glad she had. All he cared about now was making sure she didn’t leave. Before Jared or Trey could say another word, he jumped from his chair and was out the door.

Nicki leaned against the rail of the fence, watching the mare with her colt and feeling totally at ease for the first time in a month. She’d probably never been safer than at this very moment. There were still two mysterious black-clad, military-type friends of Jack and Jimmy’s on the property. Not to mention the fact that Jared and his barn hands had proven they could also be armed and ready for anything.

Her father had called on the phone extension in the barn late last night. Tony was all over the New York news. He’d been arrested for tax evasion and racketeering. All his files and computers had been seized. They’d denied his request for bail. Tony had a heap of trouble to deal with now. Hopefully he’d be much too busy to remember her.

Even so, her father had said he’d feel safer with her out of New York for a little longer, so she’d happily agreed to remain where she was. Staying on the farm was no hardship. She’d come to really love it here. Not to mention it’s where Jack was.

What a difference a day made. She sighed. Now if only Jack would get out of bed so she could surprise him. He thought she’d flown back to New York.

As usual, she didn’t hear Jack until he was right behind her. She smiled as he slipped his arms around her and nuzzled her neck. She tilted her head to one side and let him kiss from her ear to her collarbone.

Groaning in pleasure, she finally managed to say, “Your family’s going to see us if you’re not careful.” Not that she really wanted him to stop.

“I don’t care.” He spun her around, and she saw how serious his face had suddenly become. “I’m trying to convince you not to go back to New York. To stay here and be nearer to me.”

She opened her mouth to tell him she wasn’t going back. In fact, her father was talking about selling his farm in New York and retiring down here, but Jack put one finger on her lips to silence her.

“Nicki, I can’t promise you it will be perfect. I’m away a lot, but I’ll be with you every second I can if you’ll let me.”

She waited, and since he seemed to be done, she finally got to tell him what she’d been dying to.

“I’m not going back. I’m moving down here. My father’s coming down next week to see me and we’re going to look at a small horse property Jared told me about for sale in the next town.” She smiled at the surprised look on his face. “So it looks like I’ll be around whenever you are.”

He whooped, picked her up and spun her around until she was dizzy. She was laughing when he finally stopped spinning them.

Jack didn’t put her down. She remained level with his gorgeous gold-flecked eyes. Nicki wrapped her legs around his waist and became very aware of the alignment of their anatomy. “I don’t think I can wait until dark for the drive-in to open tonight. What do you say we go on upstairs to my apartment right now?”

“Are you sure your papa’s definitely not coming until next week?” He looked very tempted by her offer, even while trying to be respectful of her father.

She laughed. “I’m sure.”

Jack grinned. “Then I think that is an excellent idea.”



## 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 or 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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Ride

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

## Trey

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### *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.

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.

### *Enjoy the following excerpt for Trey*

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."

*When country boys meet a city girl, everyone is in for a wild ride.*

## Unridden

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### *Studs in Spurs, Book 1*

Slade Bower and Mustang Jackson are living the high life on the professional bull-riding circuit. The prize money is big, the bulls are rank and the women are willing. But something is missing.

For Slade, waking up in a different city with a different woman each morning is holding less and less appeal. Even Mustang's creative attempts to shake things up don't help. Then along comes a big-city author who's like nothing they've ever encountered. Something about her makes Slade sit up and take notice—and Mustang is always up for anything.

Romance writer Jenna Block has a problem—her agent thinks a cowboy book will jump-start her career. A born New Yorker, Jenna doesn't do cowboys, not on paper, and definitely not in real life. Luckily for her there are two cowboys ready, willing and able to take her out of her comfort zone in every way that counts...and some ways she hadn't counted on.

Warning: This story contains two hot cowboys, one very lucky woman, hot ménage sex and lots of bull.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Unridden:*

"Wow. This is nice." Jenna had trouble diverting her eyes away from the large bed.

Her pulse raced. She was nervous, very nervous, and making conversation seemed the best way to postpone the inevitable—that being her and two cowboys she barely knew together in that big bed. But the moment she'd suggested they come back to the trailer, her decision had been made. After seeing the looks on both of their faces, she was pretty sure they knew it too.

There was no turning back now. Not that she wanted to. The internal do-I-or-don't-I debate was done—she only hoped her bravado lasted long enough for her to actually go through with it without passing out from nerves.

"I like to try to stay at hotels during the competitions, but they were all booked," Mustang explained apologetically. "On top of the bull-riding finals there's some huge romance convention in town, or so I was told."

As Mustang grinned pointedly at her, Jenna bit her lip and cringed. "Yeah, that would be the one I'm at. Sorry about that."

Mustang laughed. "Don't be. It's not your fault. Besides, Slade actually likes the trailer better anyway."

Jenna glanced at Slade, who was watching her and Mustang closely while not saying much. Actually, he wasn't saying anything, as usual. "I don't blame him for liking it. It's a nice trailer."

"Exactly how many trailers have you been in, darlin'?" Mustang raised a brow in challenge.

"Counting this one? Um, one." Jenna felt her cheeks heat.

Mustang grinned. "That's what I thought. Make yourself comfortable. I'm gonna hit the head, then get us those drinks."

After Mustang closed himself into the tiny toilet room, Slade finally spoke. "What's all this about, Jenna? Guzzling your drink at the bar. Asking to come back here to the trailer when last night you wanted nothing to do with it. You've done a total one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turnaround since yesterday. What's up?"

She considered his question and her answer very carefully. "Today's my birthday, Slade."

His head dipped once in a nod. "Happy birthday."

"It's my thirty-fifth." She tried not to wince.

Slade shrugged. "So what?"

"*So what?*" Jenna laughed. "Easy for you to say. What are you? Like twenty-five?"

"I'm turning twenty-seven next month actually. Mustang's twenty-five, though."

She rolled her eyes. "Great, that's just great. Well, at least I'm not old enough to have birthed you both."

Slade shook his head. "What does it matter? You're only as old as you feel."

"Maybe that's my problem, Slade. I *feel* old. I'm thirty-five, have no boyfriend, and I'm starting to seriously doubt my career choice. I'm not where I thought I'd be at this point in my life."

"First of all, you don't look thirty-five."

Jenna snorted. "Thanks."

"As for the rest, I don't know shit about writing or books or what plans you had for your life, but as far as the no boyfriend part... I can't say I'm unhappy about that."

She raised her gaze to meet his. "Really?"

That had been quite a revelation from the man of few words. For the first time since meeting him, Jenna really looked at Slade, without looking away this time. She stared deep into his dark eyes and saw the man beneath the stone-hard exterior.

He nodded. "Yeah. Really."

Maybe it had been the vodka and her deepening gloom over her crappy cowboy book on top of being yet another year older that had prompted Jenna to suggest going back to the trailer in the first place. But right now, it was Slade and his sincerity that made Jenna not doubt her decision one bit. She wanted this. Hell, she was pretty sure she needed this.

Jenna stepped forward and leaned toward him. There wasn't much distance between them to begin with given the size of the trailer, and now Slade was right in front of her, their bodies almost touching.

Slade was still too tall for her to reach what she wanted, until, eyes never leaving hers, he lowered his head a few inches, meeting her halfway. Tipping her head up to close that last temptingly tiny space, she touched her lips to his. She heard the sharp breath he dragged in through his nose at the contact.

As Slade's rough palms came up and cradled her face, his mouth pressed harder against hers...and then the latch on the trailer bathroom jiggled.

In the blink of an eye, Slade raised his head and took one giant step back, leaving Jenna alone with her raging hormones.

She and Slade maintained eye contact for what seemed like forever before Mustang came to stand next to them again. Jenna turned in time to see the interested look Mustang gave them both.

"Hi." Jenna smiled at him.

Mustang raised a brow and drawled out a slow, low, "Hey, darlin'." The sound sent a quiver straight through her.

Oh, boy, was she in trouble.



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