

A photograph of a muscular man from the chest up, shirtless, wearing a black belt and two dog tags on a chain. He is looking slightly to the right. The background features a large red and white flag, possibly the American flag, draped behind him. The lighting is dramatic, highlighting his muscles.

SANDHAIN publishing

JIMMY

RED, HOT, & BLUE

CAT JOHNSON

Social butterfly and a soldier in the Special Forces—a match made in...bed.

Red Hot & Blue, Book 3

Special Forces gave Jimmy Gordon the undercover skills of a chameleon, but nothing prepared him for Amelia Monroe-Carrington, the governor's hot, redheaded daughter. She thought she was seducing a banquet waiter, and he let her.

His next assignment pulled him from her bed and into the worst six months of his life. Images of Lia were what kept him alive imprisoned in Kosovo, and even now he's home and recovered, she's still in his head.

For her father's political career, Lia has always done the appropriate thing, right down to dating a senator's son. Her one rebellious act, an incredible night with a totally *inappropriate* man, ended when he disappeared. And then never called.

When they unexpectedly meet again, the pull between them is stronger than ever, tempting Lia to stop sacrificing her own happiness for the family dynasty.

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

Warning: Contains incredible one-night-stand sex hot enough to withstand time, distance, and some really nasty terrorist torture.

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Jimmy

Cat Johnson

Dedication

For all my military consultants who so patiently answer my questions day and night. I thank you.

Chapter One

6 months ago

Jimmy Gordon glanced down the length of the table packed nearly shoulder-to-shoulder with the bulk of the men seated there. All five of his teammates wore a similarly confused-looking expression in reaction to their leader's vague orders to "suit up and let's roll".

"Excuse me, sir." He raised his hand and got the attention of the commander. "Could you clarify? What exactly is our assignment?"

In the front of the room stood a rolling rack that held black trousers, white button-down shirts, short black coats and bow ties. Six of each and all on hangers under clear plastic, the reason the team had the same baffled look on their faces. They usually wore flak jackets and weapons, not waiters' jackets and bow ties.

The commander remained unfazed by the doubt-filled question. "You heard me, Gordon. Change into the black-and-whites. Tonight, you'll all be waiters. Except for Coleman, he'll be manning the communications equipment, and your brother, he'll be a bartender."

"Why do you get to tend bar?" Jimmy frowned at his brother, Jack, seated next to him.

"Because I'm so pretty, I need to be behind something sturdy to keep the women off me?" Jack grinned.

Jimmy scowled at Jack's high opinion of himself while the commander continued with the instructions for their mission—if you could call it a mission.

"This party is being attended by some big shit VIPs, both domestic and foreign. Government and civilian. The chatter on the lines indicates there could possibly be an *attempted* attack. I say attempted because our team will be on-site replacing the waitstaff. Anything goes down, we'll be ready for it."

BB Dalton raised his hand hesitantly. "Um...but, sir. I don't know how to be a waiter, sir."

"Yeah, and like *I* know how to be a waiter?" Bull snorted.

Bull had earned his nickname through sheer size. Jimmy got a mental image of Bull in a china shop and figured that was pretty much what it was going to be like tonight, except Bull would be carrying a silver tray in his big mitt-sized hands and wearing a bow tie.

Matt Coleman chimed in from behind his ever-present laptop. "It's easy. I waited tables at one of the catering halls on Long Island during high school and summers when I was in college. Just don't spill on anybody and you'll be fine."

Bull appeared doubtful. “Then why aren’t *you* playing a waiter, Coleman, if you know so much about it?”

“I’ll tell you what, Bull. *You* learn how to do what *I* do by tonight and I will.” Matt looked like he was feeling pretty damn confident when he made the offer. He had every right to be cocky. His technical skills had saved all their asses a time or two.

“No way that’s going to happen.” Trey Williams chuckled. “I doubt Bull’s fingers would even fit on the keys.”

Laughing, Jimmy had to agree. They were all safer with Matt on the console, even if it meant Bull spilling things on the rich guys tonight.

Watching the exchange with an expression of amused patience, the commander finally held up one hand to silence them. “If we’re done bickering, ladies, grab your uniforms and weapons—leg holsters only—and let’s go. I want you all as familiar with the layout of the venue tonight as you are with your own dicks. Got it?”

Jack smirked. “That will be pretty familiar for you, big brother, considering I haven’t seen any women around lately volunteering to hold yours for you.”

Jimmy got laid plenty. He was just discreet. Although he had been experiencing a bit of a dry spell lately. He raised a brow in his brother’s direction. “They’re not exactly lined up for you either, little brother.”

“That’s because I’m holding out for the love of my life. That cute little thing who tends bar down the street.”

He knew the one Jack was talking about. Word was she didn’t date military guys. “If that’s true, then I think you’ll be holding your own for quite some time yet.”

“Twenty bucks says I get a date with her before summer.” Jack stuck out his hand to shake on the bet.

“You’re on.” Jimmy took it with pleasure. Easiest twenty bucks he’d ever make. With the wager secured, they both rose from their seats as the table began to empty. Jimmy found the hanger marked with his name and grabbed his uniform from the rack. Wondering what the hell the night would bring, he headed out of the meeting room with the rest of the team.

Two short hours later, Jimmy winced as he ran a finger under the incredibly stiff collar of his white tuxedo shirt. The damn thing felt like a noose around his neck. There was a reason he’d joined the Special Forces instead of taking a corporate job. It was so he wouldn’t have to wear a shirt and tie to work everyday. Yet here he was, not only in an overly starched shirt, but in a bow tie no less. Figuring the loaded .40 caliber handgun strapped to his leg balanced out the sissy bow tie on the testosterone scale, he still wasn’t happy about the whole situation.

“Don’t all you boys look cute.” Matt’s voice came through the communicator implanted in Jimmy’s ear and interrupted his internal soliloquy about his hatred of the shirt and tie. The mocking only seemed to make the discomfort seem worse since Matt was safely locked away in the surveillance van wearing his own nice comfortable clothes. “I’ve got eyes and ears up and running. Talk to me.”

“Gordon, Jimmy.” In the usual, preset order, Jimmy checked in first and confirmed his receipt of Matt’s communication, such as it was, about having audio and visual surveillance in place.

“Gordon, Jack.”

“Williams.”

“Bull.”

“BB.”

The rest of the team checked in, except for the commander.

“Commander?” Matt’s question came through Jimmy’s earpiece.

Jimmy could see the commander across the room in his own penguin suit, looking just as uncomfortable as he felt.

“Yeah, I’m here, Coleman. Damn it. Let’s get this show on the road. This tie is killing me.”

At least rank didn’t have its privileges on this op. Enjoying the thought immensely, Jimmy smiled.

“You guys better go into the kitchen and find out what you’ll be passing,” Matt warned.

“You mean besides gas?” Obviously pleased with his own wit, Jack beamed. He looked comfortable in his position behind the bar. If only Jimmy had been lucky enough to be assigned the job of bartender instead of stuck out here trying to play waiter.

He heard a round of snickers through his earpiece in response to Jack’s juvenile joke.

“Ha, ha, Jack. Very funny.” Judging by his tone, Matt was not amused. “You’re all lucky. Tonight is butler service, just passed hors d’oeuvres. But I’m serious about this. People are going to ask what’s on your tray. Take it from me, you’ll feel like an idiot if you don’t know.”

Jimmy had a feeling they might actually be better off with Bull on the communications console and Matt out here. He really was the only one who knew what the hell he was doing as a waiter. All of their training for Special Task Force Zeta didn’t prepare them one little bit for butler service.

Damn, did people even have butlers nowadays? Jimmy saw the first guest arrive, and judging by the look of him, these people did. “Guests are arriving.” He turned his head to face the wall as he spoke and kept his voice low as a few more people filtered into the room. Then, always alert, Jimmy went back to visually sweeping the room.

“I’m ready.” He heard Jack’s voice and a champagne cork pop simultaneously.

The commander nodded once. “Let’s roll, boys.”

Their leader looked impatient to get this assignment over and done with. Jimmy couldn’t agree more.

Trey, Bull and BB all headed toward the entrance to the kitchen. Jimmy decided he better follow and see what the hell waited for them on this butler service crap. When he arrived in the rapidly filling kitchen crowded with cooks and now his teammates, a counter covered in big silver trays containing tiny food greeted him. The team lined up. Being in the military, they were all extra skilled at waiting in line. It was the next part Jimmy was concerned about as the chef shoved a tray at BB.

“Herb-encrusted goat cheese.” The chef’s words were spewed with every bit as much disdain and authority as a drill instructor barking orders to a new recruit at boot camp. Maybe this wasn’t going to be as far out of their realm of familiarity as Jimmy had anticipated.

BB picked up the tray with two slightly unsteady hands. Turning in slow motion toward the door, he tenuously balanced the tray as if it held a nuclear bomb.

Trey stepped forward.

“Bruschetta,” the chef barked with another shove.

“Bru-whatta?” Trey frowned down at the little red triangles laid out in an artful display in front of him.

The look the chef shot him could have wilted the green leafy things garnishing Trey’s tray. *Trey’s tray, that’s funny.* Jimmy laughed to himself at his own little joke. He’d have to find a way to use that later.

“It’s chopped tomatoes with basil on garlic toast points,” the chef explained none too patiently.

“Oh.” Trey grabbed his tray with one hand, raised a brow and then left the kitchen.

“Don’t piss off the chef, whatever you do. I had one throw a butcher knife at me once.” Matt’s voice issued that warning to them all, unbeknownst to the chef in question.

Great. Now Jimmy had to worry about the chef throwing things at him on top of terrorists blowing up the rich guys who were going to be asses to them for not knowing what bruschetta was.

Bull stepped forward as the chef shoved another tray forward.

“Wild mushrooms and brie on sourdough toast.”

Hmm. Who knew toast was so highbrow? It was in two of these things already. Jimmy had been eating toast all his life. He hadn’t known he was so classy.

Bull took the mushroom toast things and looked like a storybook giant carrying a doll-sized tray out of the kitchen.

Uh oh. Jimmy was up next. He stepped up to the stainless steel table.

“Hot parsnip soup.” The tray slid toward him as the chef announced its contents.

Uh oh, again. His silver and very slippery tray contained about twenty tall shot glasses filled with a whitish liquid that he thought looked too much like semen to even contemplate drinking, or eating or whatever. But that wasn’t the least of it. How was he supposed to carry this without those shot glasses sliding all over the place?

The commander was behind him, so he stepped aside to magnanimously allow him to go first. “Sir?”

“Oh no, Gordon. That one’s all yours. And don’t call me sir.”

Under the impatient scrutiny of the chef, Jimmy cringed a bit and picked up the tray with shaking hands. He could shoot the bull’s-eye out of a target with a hand so steady he could perform brain surgery with it, but carry a tray full of semen-soup-filled shot glasses and he was...well...shot.

Jimmy somehow got himself out the door without spilling, although the whole lot of glasses shifted slightly to the left, along with the white lace doily that may look nice, but did dick to help him keep from spilling. He paused to scope out the situation in the rapidly filling room and nearly got knocked into by a guest as he did.

That was it. He couldn’t keep his eye peeled for the bad guys if he was staring at this gross soup in a vain effort to not accidentally dump any. Jimmy gingerly walked over to his brother at the bar. “I’m leaving this tray here with you before I spill it.”

“What the hell is it?” Jack glanced at the contents of the glasses.

“Parsnip soup.”

Jack winced. “Well, it looks like—”

Jimmy held up his hand to stop Jack before he went any further with his most likely X-rated description. “I know what it looks like. Just tell the guests what it is if they ask. I’m going to do a walk-through and see what’s up.”

“All right, but nobody’s going to drink that shi—I mean stuff.” Jack censored himself just as a couple walked up to the bar and into earshot.

Jimmy smiled. This gig might not be too bad. It would definitely be something to talk about over drinks later. Until then, he’d just keep dumping his trays with Jack so he wouldn’t have to deal with them.

Proud of his stroke of genius, Jimmy was still congratulating himself when he saw one hot number walk into the room on the arm of one of the VIPs they were there to protect. An old dude he sincerely hoped was not her date. That would be a shame, since she was hotter than that soup he’d ditched and a hell of a lot more attractive.

Her red hair was pulled up to reveal the sexiest porcelain-white neck and shoulders he’d ever seen. Her legs seemed to stretch nearly up to her armpits. Her black, strapless dress slit up the side nearly hip-high was pretty nice to look at too. Big eyes, which he could see from across the room were as blue as the cool pond on his mama’s farm, completed this vision of walking, talking sex that would fulfill any man’s fantasy.

Wow. Good thing he’d ditched that tray. Otherwise, he definitely would have dropped it when he saw her.

She was gorgeous and she knew it. Head held high, she waved off BB and his tray with a flick of her wrist without even glancing at him. Jimmy watched the commander sidle up to her. It looked as if he had teeny tiny lambchops on his tray. That figured The commander not only got food easy to carry, but it was

something the hot chick actually wanted. She grabbed a chop and a little white napkin and turned back to listen to something her companion was saying to another old guy in a tux.

Jimmy swallowed. His mouth started to water, and not only because the lamb looked really good and he hadn't eaten since lunch. It was because he was picturing her doing something else with that luscious mouth as he watched her suck on the delicate lamb bone. *Mmm, mmm.*

"Gordon." Jimmy jumped at the unexpected and harsh sound of the commander's voice through his earpiece.

"What?" Jimmy heard Jack's surprised response.

"Not you, Jack. The other Gordon." The commander sounded annoyed.

Jimmy turned toward the wall so no one would wonder why he was talking to himself and whispered, "Sir?"

"Stop drooling over the redhead and do a sweep of the area, damn it. And don't think I didn't notice you *forget* your tray at the bar. Good job on that one."

Jimmy turned and saw the commander shaking his head but grinning across the room. He'd gotten caught ogling Red, but at least he wasn't in trouble over the soup. He nodded once then headed off to do a lap around the public and staff areas.

Amelia Monroe-Carrington pasted on a sweet smile and feigned interest in what the senator and her father, the governor, were discussing. They were deep into campaign season and if she had to go to one more party and pretend she was having a good time, Lia feared she'd lose her mind. Unfortunately, there were many more such parties on their schedule.

"Amelia. How is your mother feeling?"

Lia wrestled her wandering attention back and focused on the senator's question. "Better, though she wasn't quite up for tonight. Thank you for asking."

The explanation tasted bitter on her tongue. Her mother had been deemed fit by the doctors months ago, and yet here Lia was, still playing lady of the family. Lia had been more than happy to fill in as her father's date when it was necessary during her mother's recovery from a bout with a bleeding ulcer, but now she was clearly being taken advantage of.

"Glad to hear she's on the mend. Please give her my regards." The senator's eyes dropped to take in the exposed cleavage of a passing woman and Lia smothered a scowl. Instead, she pasted on her campaign-picture smile.

"I will be sure to do that, Senator."

Lia supposed she shouldn't blame her mother for seeing a way to escape the political society's merry-go-round and taking it. It had most likely been both her father and his career that had given her mother the

ulcer in the first place. Lia only wished her father hadn't dumped the full responsibility of publicly supporting him on her shoulders so happily.

She knew exactly why her father had readily jumped on the opportunity to have her be his new social partner, and the reason was standing before her now, holding his martini and looking down women's dresses. Her father made no secret of his desire to see Lia married off to the senator's self-absorbed son. An alliance of two of the greatest southern political families, he'd called it. The entire concept made her feel ill.

At least the senator's son, John Dickson III wasn't here with his father tonight. He was as pompous as his name made him sound, and Lia had no interest whatsoever in the man. Lia wanted to be swept off her feet, fall head over heels in love and marry someone who would give her the happy ever after she'd always dreamed of. That, however, didn't seem to matter to her father at all. He wanted her married not for love, not for compatibility, not because of overwhelming sexual chemistry, but for politics.

She'd seen what her father and mother's *alliance* was like. They'd had separate bedrooms for as long as she could remember. She was pretty sure they'd only had sex once and that was the night she was conceived. However, the all-powerful families of the Monroes and the Carringtons had been united with their marriage, so everyone pretended they were happy. Even Lia.

She stifled the urge to sigh and glanced around the room, actually seeing it for the first time since her arrival. All these parties were alike. She'd long ago stopped observing them, except maybe to see what horrendous fashions reared their ugly heads on some of the women who dared stray from the campaign party circuit uniform of the basic black dress. Lia had an entire closet of black dresses, because heaven forbid you wore the same one twice.

Her gaze swept the room and landed on not one, not two, but half a dozen really buff male members of the waitstaff. Where in the world did the caterer get these guys? Had Chippendales gone out of business and all the dancers needed to start waiting tables?

Watching one huge guy trying to balance a tray in one hand while handing the mayor and his wife a cocktail napkin, Lia had to bite the inside of her lip to stop from laughing. The server was concentrating so hard, the tip of his tongue stuck out between his lips as he frowned.

Lia glanced around some more and saw a cutie behind the bar smiling at the wife of one of the most powerful businessmen in town. The object of his flirtation was absolutely eating up all the attention. She leaned over the bar, giving the bartender a clear view of her exposed cleavage, which he was shamelessly taking advantage of.

She took closer inventory of the staff. They all displayed varying levels of gorgeousness, incompetence and hilarity. Her eyes landed on the sixth member and Lia realized she was not the only one doing some observing. He was staring right at her, watching her as she watched all of them.

Boldly, she raised a brow and met his stare head-on. Mirroring her, he raised a brow back and treated her to a crooked smile. Then his expression changed. He seemed to stand a little straighter. He broke his gaze from hers and was gone from the room before she could fully appreciate the rear view of his tight black pants pulling across tight butt cheeks.

That was a shame. He'd been a welcome distraction. Lia snagged another lambchop from a passing waiter whose arm muscles strained the seams of his jacket. As she bit into the tasty flesh and chewed, she considered how she'd like to nibble on the tall, dark and handsome waiter. Hopefully he'd return soon.

Chapter Two

Jimmy was making some good progress with the hot redhead when Matt's voice came across the comm unit. "Code Orange."

The commander's gaze immediately landed on Jimmy. He was the only man there not burdened by a serving tray, except for Jack, who couldn't leave the bar. Jimmy nodded to the commander. The hot chick would have to wait. He had a job to do and he couldn't do it in the middle of a cocktail party where he was supposed to be nothing more than a waiter.

He slipped into the hallway where he could respond to Matt unobserved. "What's the Code Orange, Matt?"

"I ran the guest list through the computer and got a hit. One of the names matches an alias used by a terrorist on our watch list."

It looked like the shit might be about to hit the fan. Jimmy felt his adrenaline begin to pump at the thought of some action. "Give me the name. I'll find him."

Matt did as requested and Jimmy headed immediately to the entrance where the guests were being cleared through security. The guard there pointed Jimmy in the direction of the guy who'd checked into the party under that name.

Jimmy nearly laughed when he saw him. He ducked around a corner to talk to Matt. "Uh, Matt. Unless your terrorist is a little old gray-haired man of about eighty who uses a walker, the name is just a coincidence."

Matt's laugh came through the earpiece. "Roger that."

"Anyone else?"

"Negative. The rest of the list looks good."

After reporting his findings, Jimmy went back inside to resume his post, but he knew the magical moment with Red had been broken. That thought had him scowling as he made his way down the hallway toward the ballroom, until he smacked right into the redhead of his dreams coming out of the ladies' room.

Reflex had him reaching out with both hands to steady the incredibly sexy woman as she teetered on her high heels. "Sorry, darlin'."

Her brows shot up to her hairline and an amused smirk appeared. He realized he probably shouldn't be calling the guests *darlin'*, but what could he do? He'd been calling females not related to him that since puberty. It just slipped out.

Red didn't seem too upset about it though. As Jimmy reluctantly released his hold on her, she raised her hands and ran them up and down his lapels. "You're forgiven. What's your name?"

He breathed deeply the rich scent of her. Expensive-smelling perfume with an undertone of lamb.

"James." Entranced by her clear blue gaze, he somehow managed to supply his given name for her. Though even his mother didn't call him James unless she was mad, it seemed to fit better in this situation than Jimmy so he went with it.

The vision of sex on heels before him reached into her envelope-sized purse—was everything rich people owned and ate tiny?—and took out a pen and scrap of paper. On it she scribbled something and then handed it to him. "Nice to meet you, James."

The pleasure was all his, especially when she winked and sashayed away and he got to drool over the rear view.

When she'd turned the corner—without looking back, he noted—Jimmy finally had the presence of mind to look down at what she'd written on the paper she'd given him. Seven digits and a name. *Lia*. She'd given him her phone number and he hadn't even asked. That was one hell of a woman. One he definitely would be happy to get to know better.

Jimmy suppressed the whoop of excitement threatening to bubble out of him, but since he was alone in the hall he figured he could ask the question uppermost in his mind out loud. "Hey, Matt. When is this gig scheduled to be over?"

Whenever it was, it wouldn't be soon enough for him.

A few hours later, Jimmy walked out of the back door alongside Jack and Trey. In what would have looked like a coordinated effort to an outside observer, all three tugged at their collars simultaneously as they struggled to rip off their bow ties. Jimmy couldn't get his off fast enough for his liking.

"That was a waste of time," Trey grumbled.

Jimmy wouldn't exactly say that the fact no terrorists had blown up the place made it a waste of time, but it was frustrating to go to all the effort for a false alarm. Nothing more exciting than Matt's early scare about the old dude with the suspicious name had happened all night, unless you counted the phone number Jimmy had gotten from Lia. Now that was something to get excited about. He patted his breast pocket and assured himself the number was still safely tucked away. His fingers itched to grab for his phone and dial it right then and there. Instead, he controlled the impulse until he could get somewhere alone.

"Well, at least you didn't drop your tray, Trey." Jack grinned, obviously proud of his cleverness.

Jimmy frowned. "Hey, that was going to be my joke."

"Late again, big brother." Jack slapped him on the back. "So, what do you guys say we hit the bar after checking in at headquarters? We can get a cold one and I can see how my hot bartender is doing."

Free from the tie now, Trey undid the top two buttons of his shirt. "Sure. As long as we can change out of these monkey suits first."

Jimmy thought again of the precious piece of paper tucked away in his pocket. It was already getting late. He had to either call now or not at all if he had any hope of meeting up with her tonight. And he really, really hoped... "You two go ahead. I'm, uh, a little tired."

Jack shot him a look. "Tired? From walking around a party picking up dirty napkins all night? Come on. We'll just go for a bit."

"It wasn't just playing waiter. We had to keep on alert in case anything did go down." That much was true, even though Jack was correct. Jimmy wasn't tired from the party. He was tired of being celibate and had every hope Lia would help him out in that area.

"Which it didn't," Jack reminded him.

He struggled to come up with an excuse not to go to the bar so he could see Lia, if she wanted to see him. "Yeah, but I'd have to stop by the bank and get some cash first."

"Yeah, and? So what? That'll take like a minute." Jack stared at him, waiting for a response.

"But then I'd need to get gas too." Jack was still frowning at him doubtfully, so Jimmy added, "Maybe I'll meet y'all there later."

Jack shook his head. "Whatever."

Trey stopped next to his truck. "See you guys back at the base."

They had each taken their own vehicles, thinking it would appear less suspicious arriving individually as waiters would, instead of piling out of an unmarked black van as a group the way the team usually traveled.

"Yeah, see ya." Ignoring his brother's displeasure with him, Jimmy thankfully shut himself in his vehicle.

Grateful once again he had his own transportation, he sat in the driver's seat and waited for Jack to close the driver's door of his own car, then he punched Lia's number into his cell phone.

"Hello?" Her sexy voice sent a shiver right down from his ears to his toes and everywhere in between.

"Hey, darlin'. It's Ji...uh, James."

"Hello there, James. Where are you?"

"In my car outside the party. We just got off." Oh yeah. Judging by the sexy purr of her voice, he had a feeling he was about to *get off* all right.

"Meet me at the Hilton in ten minutes. Ask for the private elevator that leads to the presidential suite. I'll leave your name at the desk so they'll let you up." Jimmy heard a click and then she was gone.

Holy crap. He didn't know what to be amazed at more. The fact he was going to get lucky with the hottest woman he'd ever laid eyes on, or the invitation to the presidential suite at the Hilton. Meanwhile,

there was no way he could drive back to base, check in and then get to the hotel in ten minutes, and Jimmy had a feeling Lia was not the kind of woman who responded well to being kept waiting.

The mission had been uneventful. Maybe no one would notice if he didn't check in tonight. His decision made, he drove directly to the Hilton so fast it was a miracle he didn't get pulled over for speeding. He stopped only long enough to grab a box of condoms and breath mints at the twenty-four-hour convenience store across the street from the hotel.

Jimmy remembered to unstrap his leg holster and secure his weapon in the glove compartment. He even remembered to lock his parked car, but that was about the only time his mind strayed from thinking about what was about to happen up in that suite.

Inside the massive marble lobby, he gave his name to the man standing behind the front desk, thinking there was a good chance he'd be thrown out on his ass. Lo and behold, he wasn't. Instead, he was ushered by another uniform-clad employee into a brass and mahogany-lined elevator car with only two buttons inside. They read *Lobby* and *Presidential Suite*.

As the valet, or whatever he was called, rode up the many floors to the top with him, Jimmy finally allowed himself to stop thinking this whole thing must be some kind of a joke. That was something he knew for sure when the elevator doors opened onto the eerily quiet, private hallway on the top floor of the building.

The hotel employee held the door open with one arm and dismissed him with a nod. "Have a good night, sir."

"Thanks." He stepped out onto a marble floor. With a swish, the doors swept shut behind him and he was alone facing a single, massive white door.

Jimmy ignored the erratic pounding of his heart and raised his hand to knock. When the door swung wide a moment later, Lia stood before him wearing nothing but a black strapless bra, lacy thong underwear and mile-high heels.

He didn't question the state of her attire. Her intentions were clear enough, so he simply walked in and blindly slammed the door shut behind him. Never a man to beat around the bush, Jimmy grabbed her head with one hand and her waist with the other and sank his tongue deep into her warm, welcoming mouth. He explored down the silky warm flesh to land on her ass cheek and discovered she felt as good as she looked.

Lia let him enjoy both her mouth and body for long enough to make his hard-on start to throb as it pressed against the zipper of his pants. Then she pulled away. "You don't waste any time, do you?"

A woman who answered the door half-naked shouldn't talk about how fast he was moving.

"Darlin', you ain't seen nothing yet." He ran his hands one more time over her firm curves with a groan.

Enough with the standing. Time to get horizontal. He glanced around the large space. It was decorated like a living room with a sofa and a huge flat-screen television that he might enjoy at another time when he didn't have a raging hard-on and a willing woman beneath his hands. His gaze swept quickly over the kitchenette and dining area and landed on a partially closed door. Bingo.

She let out a small squeak as he scooped her up and headed for the adjoining room where he hoped to find a bed. A really large one if he was lucky. What he had in mind was going to take more than a little bit of time and a whole lot of space. When he pushed the door open wider with one foot and saw the king-sized mattress with the bedding already turned down for the night, it looked as if he was blessed enough to get what he wanted.

He dropped her on the bed and began tearing off what remained of his uniform. He'd long since ditched the jacket back in the car, so all he had left was the button-down shirt and pants.

She watched each piece of clothing fall to the floor, including his underwear, and then stared at his naked body. "Nice."

Jimmy didn't miss the gleam in Lia's eye as she said that. Damn right, it was nice. He worked hard enough to get this body. About time he put it to use for something other than practice maneuvers and fighting bad guys.

"Glad you approve, darlin'." He pulled her panties down with both hands and spread her legs. He ignored her surprised intake of breath and settled himself eyelevel with her creamy thighs and a whole lot more. She was totally bald down there except for a tiny neat triangle of red curls. The rest was smooth and hair-free. It was different and really hot.

He must have been staring for quite a while, because she finally reached down and grabbed his head in both hands, raising his face so he could see hers.

"What's the matter, handsome? Don't your waitress girlfriends believe in Brazilian bikini waxes?"

So that's what it was called. He'd have to remember that. But hot as she was, and as incredible as her Brazilian bikini wax looked, he didn't need any more of her smart-ass waiter comments. He was betting she was a talker, and he wanted quiet so he could fully enjoy himself.

There was one sure-fire way to make sure she stopped talking. Jimmy spun himself around so quickly she let out a small squeak. He straddled her face and pressed his cock to her lips. Since she opened her mouth and took him in without hesitation, he figured he hadn't offended her delicate, rich-girl sensibilities too badly. Damn, did her mouth feel good wrapped around him.

He lowered his head and began to enjoy a taste of her for himself. He slid his tongue between the folds of her smooth skin—boy, did he like this Brazilian thing—and he worked her over. Gently at first, then rougher.

Just as Lia's hips began to rise from the bed in response to his efforts, a loud, angry voice sounded inside Jimmy's head.

Startled, he jumped.

“James Gordon, answer me! Where the hell are you?” the voice repeated when Jimmy didn’t respond.

Visions of his mama’s unhappy face as she used his full name while reprimanding him for something as a child threatened to deflate his very happy erection, but this angry voice wasn’t his mama’s. It was the commander’s, and he had obviously turned on Jimmy’s two-way communications device.

“Mmm, James. Don’t stop.” With what had to be the worst timing ever, Lia chose that moment, while they were being monitored, to let Jimmy know how unhappy she was he’d stopped what he’d been doing.

There was a silence during which Jimmy vainly hoped communications had been lost.

“Who is that and what the *fuck* are you doing, Gordon?”

No such luck. Apparently he was still transmitting loud and clear.

“Um, sir. I’m pretty sure fucking *is* what he’s doing.” The sound of Matt’s voice, letting him know it wasn’t only the commander listening in, made the entire situation worse.

Jimmy scowled at Matt’s comment and silently cursed the communications implant one more time.

“Get a GPS reading on him, Coleman.”

Damned tracking implant.

“He’s at the Hilton, sir.” It figured Matt could locate him so fast. Jimmy guessed he was lucky Matt hadn’t pinpointed his exact location as the presidential suite’s bedroom.

“Goddamnit, Gordon. You check in at the base after an op and get officially dismissed before you go and check into a hotel to get laid. You hear me?”

The commander’s order filled Jimmy’s ear just as Lia kicked things into a higher gear. She took him even deeper into her throat and sucked hard while working his balls with her hand.

A tingling, pleasure-filled shudder passed through him. Pissed-off commander or not, Jimmy couldn’t maintain his control any longer. “Oh, yeah.”

“Was that response for me or for her, Gordon?” With an edge of annoyance in his voice, the commander questioned the words that had escaped Jimmy’s lips.

“I suppose it could be for both of you, sir,” Matt supplied not so helpfully.

Jimmy could hear the laughter in Matt’s voice and vowed to wipe the smile he knew was there right off his face at the next opportunity. Meanwhile, Lia had begun using her teeth on him and he knew there was no way he’d be able to stay quiet. He bit his lip and tried anyway.

“Gordon, my office, zero-eight-hundred. Coleman, cut communications.” If possible, the commander sounded even angrier than before, but then thankfully there was blissful silence.

Happily, Jimmy went back to work on Lia until she began to shudder beneath him. He filled her with his fingers while he circled her with his tongue and sent her directly into a hip-bucking orgasm.

Whoever said rich girls were cold hadn't been with this one. She was sweet and warm and wet, and he intended to experience all of her charms, including her incredibly sexy moans. He pulled himself out of her mouth so he could fully enjoy hearing her, loud and clear.

Longing to be inside her, Jimmy flipped back around and reached for his discarded pants with the condoms in the pocket. When he knee walked back to her across the large bed, he found her watching him with heavily lidded eyes.

Oh yeah, she wasn't near done yet, which was good, because neither was he. After a quick tear of the foil wrapper and he was safely covered, he sank himself inside her and felt exactly how *not* cold she was.

Wet and ready for him, her body accepted his like they were made to fit together. "Oh, darlin'. You feel so sweet."

He wanted the feeling to last a very long time, so he kept the pace nice and slow. Lia pulled her knees up and his next stroke sank him even deeper into her. He groaned his approval.

She threw her head back against the pillow and gripped his forearms. "Harder. Faster."

Yup, she was a talker all right, and she liked to give orders. Jimmy took orders all day at work. He wasn't about to have to follow them in bed too. With her knees pulled up and braced against his chest, he couldn't even lean down far enough to shut her up by kissing her. That didn't mean he couldn't teach her a lesson about being bossy. He slowed his rhythm even more.

"I said faster, damn it." Her ice-blue eyes flashed.

That had really pissed her off. He smiled, having more fun than he'd had in a long time. Shaking his head, he slowed down to an absolute crawl.

She frowned. There was a good chance no one had ever said no to her before, poor thing. Jimmy was proud to be the first. He stopped the in-and-out motion totally, pushed in deeper and ground himself against her in small circles. He knew how to please a woman. She'd just have to shut up long enough to realize it.

Each rotation of his hips ground the base of him against her most sensitive spot. He watched her eyes drift closed, then heard her breath catch in her throat. She started to shudder again and with one incredible cry, she shattered around him. He did love hearing her come.

Her muscles squeezed him and he enjoyed every pulse. Only when the spasms slowed to a stop did he give in to her previous wish, purely for his own pleasure of course. Jimmy took her deep and fast until he lost it himself, coming hard until he could barely support his own weight on his shaking arms. He collapsed on top of her with a groan. They both lay panting for he didn't know how long. Finally, he gathered enough energy to raise up on one elbow.

Jimmy gazed down at the satisfaction clear on Lia's face. "One word of advice, darlin'. Never tell me how to make love."

She seemed shocked for a second, and then pursed her lips in a reluctant smile. "I'll try and remember that."

He smiled too. He was still hard inside her, so he pulled out and stripped off the used condom. Quicker than she could say “yes sir, may I have another”, he’d rolled on a fresh one.

Sitting up on his knees, erection pointing proudly at her like a divining rod, Jimmy slapped her hip playfully. “Flip on over, darlin’. This time I wouldn’t mind a view of that sweet ass of yours.”

She raised one perfectly shaped brow at him, but rolled over without saying a word. He said a quick, internal word of thanks for her silence and slid himself into her for round two.

Money or not, everybody was the same when they were naked and sweaty.

Sex. The great equalizer. That should be a bumper sticker or something. Jimmy smiled to himself. He was hot tonight.

Chapter Three

The dim gray tint of dawn filtered through the blackout curtain covering the window in the suite's bedroom. After years in the military of snapping awake and being ready for action, even that dusky light was enough to break into Jimmy's sex-induced sleep coma. He came quickly back to consciousness and became immediately aware of the warm, naked body pressed against him. Memories of a long night of incredible sex flooded his mind and body.

True to form, one part of him in particular was ready for some action. He pressed his pelvis against the soft cleft of Lia's ass and let out a groan. There was no better way to wake up than with some nice, easy morning sex. Lia apparently agreed with that sentiment. With a soft sigh, she snuggled closer. Giving his hard-on better access to her, she bent one knee before pushing back against him. Just the tip of his morning erection entered her. He basked in the incredible feel of her warmth and longed for more.

Before things went any further, he slipped out of Lia and into one of the condoms he'd left within reach on the nightstand last night. He rolled back to her waiting body and slid easily inside. She purred out a groan—a soft, sleepy, contented sound. He liked that about Lia. The woman was a hellcat one moment and a kitten the next. A man would never get bored of a woman like this.

Knowing he wouldn't last long, Jimmy reached around, found Lia's sweet spot and began working it. Her muscles tightened around him and brought his impending orgasm dangerously close. He clenched his teeth and held back with all his might when he felt himself losing control, but it was no use. With her clutched close to him, he gave in. With no further choice in the matter, he let loose, sorry he hadn't lasted longer for her sake.

"I'm sorry, darlin'. Mornings tend to be quick for me."

Lia groaned seductively and rolled toward him. "That's okay. You have all day to make it up to me. Unless, of course, you have to work later."

"Work. Shit." Jimmy's gaze cut to the digital clock on the nightstand on Lia's side of the bed. He mouthed a slightly more vile curse. "I'm more sorry than you can know, but I have to shower quick and get out of here."

She raised a perfectly shaped eyebrow critically. "Why? Is your girlfriend expecting you?"

Jimmy laughed as he sat up and swung his feet to the carpeting. "No. Worse. My boss."

She frowned. "Do you have to serve at a morning event? Like a breakfast or something?"

Getting pretty damn tired of the waiter crap, Jimmy shook his head. “No. I’ve got a zero-eight...” After all the years he’d spent referring to the time by a twenty-four-hour clock, the very military sounding zero-eight-hundred had nearly slipped out of him. He managed to smother the rest of it and corrected himself. “Um, an eight o’clock meeting with him.”

Leaving her to ponder that, he strode naked into the bathroom and flipped on the water. He had just stepped into the shower and was about to soap up Little Jimmy, who he’d already divested of his latex covering, when the bathroom door opened. Jimmy felt the cool burst of air hit his skin as Lia slid open the sliding glass door. As naked as he, she stepped inside with a devilish smile. “I thought if you’re in such a hurry, I’d help you wash. It’ll go faster that way.”

He seriously doubted that, but after she closed her fingers around him and had delivered a few strokes, good sense fled and time lost all meaning. When she rinsed the soap from his skin, bent over and took him in her mouth, he couldn’t care where he was supposed to be or who was waiting for him there.

Later, dressed in the same black waiter’s pants and white shirt he’d worn on the mission, Jimmy burst through the door of the meeting room with barely a minute to spare. He hadn’t had time to go home and change, his hair was still damp from his shower with Lia, but he was there. That would have to be good enough. He took a deep breath to steady himself and then knocked on the commander’s closed door.

“Get your ass in here, Gordon.”

It wasn’t exactly a warm welcome, but Jimmy had no problem hearing the commander’s order from within the inner office. He opened the door and slipped silently into the room. Standing in front of the commander’s cluttered desk, he waited for the ax to fall.

After what seemed like a long time, during which the commander shuffled papers and ignored him, Jimmy was finally told, none too nicely, to sit the hell down.

He had a feeling this wasn’t going to be a fun meeting. In spite of the fact he’d gotten maybe an hour of sleep in between bouts with Lia, he was in such a good mood even the commander’s scowling face and unhappy tone couldn’t break it.

His little hellcat. It hadn’t taken Lia too long to lose the attitude and soften up toward him. By the morning, she was as cuddly as a kitten. A tingle ran right through him at the memory of waking up beside her.

“Of all the men on this team, you were the last one I expected to...”

Jimmy tried to pay attention as the commander laid into him, but his mind kept drifting back to the suite and thoughts of Lia. While the lecture droned on, Jimmy’s mind wandered back to the many times he and Lia had enjoyed that big king-sized bed, and then later the shower.

Mmm. He’d really liked the shower. Her body all soapy. Her hands and mouth all over him. His hands all over her. Beneath that hot spray of water while they were both slick with soap, she’d even had

him slide in for some anal action. A tingle ran straight down his spine at the memory. That had been the only time she'd broken his rule and told him what to do, but he hadn't minded following *that* order one bit. Not at all.

Jimmy wrestled his attention back to the commander before he embarrassed himself and got a hard-on right there in the office. The commander was now up and pacing the room while he ranted. That wasn't a good sign.

"In fact, after last night it would serve you right if I pulled you off of this assignment."

Assignment. What assignment? Had he missed something during his daydreaming? The commander had stopped the deluge of words and now stood staring at Jimmy, so he decided this was a good time to make amends.

"Yes, sir. I apologize. It will never happen again." Groveling out of the way, Jimmy hoped the commander would get back to the assignment and tell him what it was.

The commander scowled at him for another moment, sighed and then sat down behind his desk. This was a vast improvement over the pacing he'd been doing while chewing Jimmy out.

"You're aware of the target CENTCOM has been tracking in Kosovo?"

Jimmy's heart pounded. He suddenly had no trouble keeping his tired eyes wide open or his attention completely on the commander's words. "Yes, sir."

"We're ready to move on him. You're going in deep undercover, Gordon."

His dream assignment. Deep undercover inside a terrorist's organization.

"You leave tomorrow. Here's the dossier. Memorize it then destroy it. Basically, you're an American who's been recruited by the target's organization."

Jimmy nodded, too excited to even speak.

The commander continued. "Coleman's been setting your cover up online for months. The team will know what your assignment is, but no one else. Communications will be minimal and only when necessary. You got me? Call your mama to say goodbye, but tell her you'll be training new recruits overseas for the next six months to a year and won't have time to write or access to a phone. The same story goes for whoever the girl *du jour* is from last night. Now get out of here."

"Yes, sir. And thank you, sir." Wow. Six months to a year deep undercover. It's what he'd been preparing for for years. Along with the excitement, Jimmy felt a deep tinge of regret. Lia's cell phone number was safely folded in his wallet. He'd been toying with the idea of calling her later today.

Who was he kidding? Even if he wasn't going to be playing with the bad guys in Kosovo for an indeterminate amount of time, he knew what last night was about. She was just some spoiled society broad getting her jollies diddling with the help. If anything, he'd been the boy toy *du jour* more than the other way around. But she sure would give him plenty to think about on those long, lonely nights to come. For that, he was immensely grateful.

The meeting over, Jimmy was dismissed. Walking, actually nearly sprinting down the hall, Jimmy realized he was whistling. He couldn't wait to tell Jack he'd landed the assignment. His brother was going to be so jealous.

Chapter Four

Present Day

Jimmy sat—or more accurately lay like an invalid—on his bed with the same book he'd been trying to read for the last month open in his lap. He stared at the words on the page but they were just a meaningless jumble. Why couldn't he concentrate? It wasn't like he had anything else to do.

He could smell that his mama was baking one of her famous pies. He supposed he could limp downstairs and get some if he really wanted. Jack was still home on furlough for another few days. Maybe he could sneak outside and see what his brother and his new girl, Nicki, were up to. His other brother Jared had brought in a new stud stallion he was planning on breeding today. He could perhaps hobble over to the paddock and watch that.

Letting his head fall back against the pillow and roll to one side, he stared at the faded wallpaper he remembered so well from his childhood and decided all those ideas for diversions sounded like too much work.

Sighing, Jimmy considered taking a nap, but he doubted he could fall asleep. A man had to actually do something to get tired enough to sleep in the middle of the day.

Instead he let his mind drift to Lia, like he did so often even if it was the most pointless exercise on earth. He'd thought about her every day he was in Kosovo. He'd jerked off to visions of her each night. He didn't even feel like doing *that* anymore. In fact, he didn't think he'd had a hard-on since getting home from the military hospital in Germany.

The guards who'd taken him had worked him over pretty damn good before the team had rescued him. There'd been a time he'd wondered if he'd ever see home again. Now that he was here, safe and recovering, why didn't he feel happier about it? Maybe because there was probably something wrong with his dick too.

Just great, that in addition to the bruises, broken bones and enlarged spleen, all of which he was pretty much recovered from now. He was just considering digging his teen-years stash of girlie magazines out of the back of his closet to test this new horrifying broken-dick theory when Jack knocked on his door.

"Hey, big brother." Jack was always so damn cheerful, but then why shouldn't he be? His dick worked just fine and he was working it out day and night with Nicki.

"Hey, Jack."

Jack frowned. "You doing okay? You don't look so good."

“I’m fine. What’s up?” Jimmy wasn’t exactly in the mood for small talk today.

Unperturbed by Jimmy’s short answer, Jack walked over to sit in the chair next to the bed. He shrugged. “Oh, not much, except that I was just talking to the commander.”

“About what?” Jimmy wasn’t sure if talking about work would be a good diversion or just make him feel worse about being away from it, but he asked anyway.

Jack’s face broke out into a wide grin. “He wants you to come back to base with me when I go in a few days.”

Jimmy sat bolt upright. “Really?”

Jack nodded. “You have to call him though. There’s a doctor sign-off or something you have to get before the big brass will let you back on active duty.”

He’d get a note from his mama, the Surgeon General and the President of the US of A if it meant going back on active duty. “I’ll call him right now. Thanks, Jack.”

Jack laughed. “I thought that news would cheer you up. I just hope it makes up for my bad news.”

Jimmy paused as he reached for his cell phone on the side table. He knew it was too good to be true. He narrowed his gaze at his brother. “What bad news?”

“The governor and that bastard senator who tried to shut down our base a few years back are coming here for sweet tea and pie tomorrow.”

“What the hell... Why?” His mama was having a senator and the governor over for sweet tea and pie? Was he having a really strange dream? He hadn’t taken any painkillers in a long time. He couldn’t be hallucinating from them still being in his system.

Jack rolled his eyes. “You know that organization Jared belongs to? The one that lobbies for the small farmer? Well, the governor and the senator are coming to meet with the organization, along with a shitload of press.”

Great. Nothing Jimmy loved more than the press. “So let’s let Jared deal with them all. He planned this mess.”

“Oh, I plan on it. I’m sending Nicki away for the day too. I don’t want her face in the newspaper right now. And you and I shouldn’t be posing for any photos ourselves. The commander would shit a brick and our undercover days would be over. I figure we can hang out at the barn and watch Jared’s circus from a distance.”

Circus was a good description. From what he knew of the senator, the man was pretty much a clown who’d do anything to get the most people to cheer him on and vote him into office again. Jimmy would love watching his youngest brother Jared play gentleman farmer for the idiots, as long as *he* didn’t have to do it with him.

He nodded in agreement with Jack’s plan. “Sounds good.”

“So, Staff Sergeant Gordon. You’re here for an evaluation.” The doctor glanced down at the paper in his hand through glasses that hung just on the end of his nose. When he raised his gaze again, he looked at Jimmy over the top of the frames.

Jimmy hadn’t been referred to by his rank since he’d been recruited out of the Marines for Task Force Zeta. It sounded strange hearing it now, but he supposed it was still accurate so he didn’t correct the man.

“Yes, sir, and call me Jimmy.” He glanced at the nameplate on the desk. *Dr. Marvin Stein, PhD, MD*. That was quite a mouthful. Absently, he wondered what Marvin’s friends called him for short. Marv, perhaps?

Doctor Marv took a pen from among the many lined up neatly in his breast pocket and scribbled something on a pad of paper. “Okay, Jimmy. Tell me about yourself.”

Jimmy raised a brow. Much like the stages of grief, he’d gone through many emotions over the last twenty-four hours since the commander had ordered the psych evaluation. First he’d been elated, followed closely by anger that he didn’t need some doctor’s note to tell him if he was ready to go back to duty. Now, finally, he simply felt acceptance. Whatever it took to get back on active duty, he’d do. Even put up with Freud here watching him over the top of his granny glasses while taking notes on everything he said and did.

“Um, about me. Okay. I was born in Pigeon Hollow thirty-four years ago on the horse farm that’s been in my mama’s family for three generations. Daddy was a drunk. He took off when I was fifteen, leaving Mama to raise us three boys. I’m the oldest so I helped as much as I could. I was all-state in football in high school—”

The doctor held up his hand. “This is all very interesting, Jimmy. But perhaps we could skip ahead to what happened on your mission and your recovery since then.”

Well, he had asked. As a doctor, you would think he’d be more specific with his questions. Although it was just the local VA hospital, not the Mayo Clinic, so Jimmy didn’t expect much from the doctors.

“All right. Well, my family doc says I’m pretty much all recovered from the injuries I sustained. My ribs will be sore for a little bit more. Broken ribs seem to take forever to heal. But my spleen is back to normal now.”

“I’m not talking about your body, Jimmy, although I am happy to hear you’re healing nicely. I’m talking about you emotionally.”

Hmm. Muddier waters. “I’m fine there too, doc.”

“Ah.” The doctor nodded and scribbled something else.

Ah? What did *ah* mean? Jimmy fought the urge to stand up and grab the pad right out of his hand.

“Tell me what you’ve been doing during your time home, Jimmy.”

Wrestling his attention off the yellow paper, Jimmy managed to come up with an answer. “Um, well I was totally laid up for a few weeks or so. The doc wouldn’t let me move because of the spleen thing. My

ankle had been busted too and the house is full of stairs, so it was easier to stay up in my room. Now I get around all right though. The ankle's practically good as new, though I bet I'll be able to predict when it's going to rain from now on." He laughed at his little joke. The doctor didn't.

"And what do you do for fun?"

"Uh, well..." How was he going to explain the unauthorized and probably illegal op they'd recently staged under Jack's command? "I...uh...joined my brother and some members of my unit for a night at our old hunting cabin a few weeks back. That was fun. Oh, and my brother got a new girlfriend. She works with the horses at our farm. We all hang out together sometimes."

His life was sounding pretty pitiful now that he thought about it. If it weren't for Nicki and her mob friends, he'd have nothing at all to talk about.

"I see. What about you? Is there a special woman in your life?"

Besides the girl he'd spent one night having unforgettable sex with six months ago and hadn't stopped thinking about since? "No. My job isn't exactly conducive to long-term relationships."

He could just picture the date-night conversation had he taken Lia out before he left for his mission. Having to tell her he wasn't a waiter and that he was leaving for a job he couldn't tell her about for he didn't know how long. Oh, and he couldn't call, write or email for the undetermined duration of it. That would have gone over really well. About as well as if he could have told her the truth, that he would be pretending to be a terrorist recruit and if he was exposed they'd try to torture him to death.

Marv nodded and scribbled some more. "Of course. That's totally understandable. Any trouble sleeping since you've been home? Nightmares?"

Jimmy shook his head while squinting at the upside-down writing on the pad. "No. Not really."

During his first few days in the German military hospital, he would wake up in a cold sweat with his heart pounding until he realized he was safe. But that was to be expected, he figured. It wasn't a bad dream. More like it took a minute to remember he'd been rescued from the real-life nightmare.

The doctor was giving him that probing stare again. "Anything you say here is confidential, Jimmy. So I want you to speak freely."

Yeah. So he could tell the commander not to put him back on active duty. No way.

As Jimmy considered that, his new pal Marv continued. "I also want to be honest with you. You are incredibly well-adjusted considering what you've been through. I feel going back on active duty is the best thing for you at this point. I made that determination based upon the fact that the only thing you've shown any excitement over in this interview was the night you spent with the men from your unit."

It had been one hell of a night, but more importantly, this guy was going to let him get back to work. His heart rate kicked into high gear at the thought.

"However, I also think there are things you're not telling me. I really do want to help you. So..." The doctor took a white piece of paper out of his drawer, scribbled some more and then slid it across the desk.

“That is my recommendation you be put on active duty immediately. It’s yours to give to your commander. Take it and put it away, then tell me what you’re holding back.”

“Thanks, doc.” Jimmy took the paper, but still hesitated spilling his guts to this man. What good would it do? He just wanted to take his paper and go.

The doctor filled the silence. “Do you know why your commander sent you to me in particular and not to any of the other doctors here?”

Jimmy shook his head. “I guess I didn’t think about it.”

“I was a POW in Nam.”

“Wow. I didn’t know.” Jimmy suddenly saw the man with new respect.

Dr. Stein waited expectantly. What was it about silence that made a person want to fill it?

Jimmy shrugged. “I don’t know what kind of revelation you’re looking for here, doc. There’s really nothing to tell.”

“Isn’t there?”

Jimmy thought his lying skill had been honed pretty well, but good old Marv obviously saw right through him. Actually, he’d apparently somehow messed up in Kosovo too. Maybe he needed some more training in the deception department.

He let out a deep sigh. “It’s just that I don’t seem to have much interest in anything anymore. I feel... Well that’s just it. I don’t feel anything at all. Not angry, not happy, not excited—except for that one time with my brother and teammates. I’m not even, um, horny.”

The doc nodded. Jimmy was very happy he wasn’t taking notes on any of that, particularly the last part.

“It sounds to me like depression, which is not surprising. You’ve been in the teams so long it’s become your identity. Being forced to sit on the sidelines has left you without purpose. The lack of sexual interest is typical of depression. I think all of the symptoms will pass when you get back to the base.” He smiled. “In fact, you perked up the minute I gave you that paper. But if it doesn’t get better, call me and I’ll prescribe something for you.”

Relief flooded through him. He hadn’t realized how good it would feel to admit his fears to a stranger, someone he hadn’t grown up with and who wouldn’t judge him, try to cheer him up or reason away his feelings. He stood and extended his arm to shake hands with the doctor. “That’s great to hear, doc. I feel better already.”

The doctor laughed. “I can see that. Good luck, Jimmy.”

“Thanks, doc.” He nodded and was out the door with the golden ticket back to active duty clutched tightly in his hand. Now all he had to do was make it through Jared’s political circus this afternoon and he was home free.

Chapter Five

Lia rode in the limo next to her father and stared out the window at the rural scenery speeding by. Meeting with the Small Farmers Coalition at Gordon Equine was far preferable to some stuffy cocktail party. Best of all, although the senator was coming, his son wasn't. Lia would gladly walk her three-hundred-dollar shoes through horse manure any day if it meant getting away from him.

The sun was shining. She was wearing a pantsuit instead of a dress that required a torturous strapless bra and stockings. All in all, it was a good day. It would have been a better day if her mother had agreed to come with them when Lia suggested the trip to the country might do her good. Of course, she'd said she wasn't feeling up to the drive. It had become such habit for Lia to accompany her father, she feared her mother would never take her rightful place again.

Lia mentally reviewed her schedule for the next week. There would be three of the aforementioned stuffy cocktail parties this weekend alone. The most ridiculous thing was she had to control her heartbeat each and every time she walked into one. Even after six months, she'd search the waitstaff to see if James was among them.

It was crazy. She needed help. Although perhaps he needed the help. What guy could have the amazing kind of night they had together and not call afterward? She wasn't expecting him to ask her out on a date or anything, but come on. Not even a midnight drunken booty call? Nothing, nada, zip. For six damn months.

The bigger question was why did it bother her so much? She'd worked that one over in many a therapy session. Her therapist thought it was because he had rejected her first before she had a chance to reject him and that it particularly bothered her since he was from a lower station in life.

She knew it was more likely she was obsessed with him because, unlike all the men who fawned over her, this one hadn't taken any of her shit. He was a real man, not a spoiled rich boy. He knew his mind and treated her like an equal, not the governor's daughter. After the initial shock that she wasn't always going to get her way around James had worn off, she'd really liked that about him.

Her therapist also thought she'd slept with James as a rebellion against her father and the pressure he'd been putting on her regarding the senator's son. The psychologist may be a little bit right about that. Amelia nearly laughed out loud in the limo when she considered what her father would say if she ever brought James home.

Hello, father. I'd like you to meet my new boyfriend the waiter. I'm going to marry him and have his babies and they will likely all grow up to be waiters too.

Marry him. Sure. She hadn't even made enough of an impression for him to call her. But boy, had he made an impression on her. He knew how to please a woman, at least this woman. Every inch of her. All night long until morning when he had to rush off to an early meeting with his boss.

Wait... Early meeting? What kind of early meetings did waiters have? That was just an excuse to get out of there and she'd been too blinded from the sex haze he'd left her in to see it then. That was a demoralizing thought. What was laughable was she had actually hesitated before inviting him to the hotel because she was worried he'd fall in love with her and become a stalker or something. Humph. He probably slept with a different woman at every party he worked. No wonder he was so well-stocked with condoms. He probably bought them by the case.

Lia shook her head at her own foolishness. Six damn months and he was still on her mind and it still killed her he hadn't called. She definitely needed help, or maybe some sex. But the only man she'd even gone to dinner with lately was the senator's son, at her father's insistence. No way was she going to encourage him with anything more than just a casual dinner and a peck on the cheek or she'd find herself married. That was not going to happen. John III held zero appeal for her, as a lifemate or a bedmate.

The limo pulled down a charming magnolia-lined drive and up to a white farmhouse that, in typical southern tradition, had Tara-like columns in front. The car came to a stop and the driver opened Lia's door. She stepped out into the sunlight, slipping her sunglasses on to shield her eyes from the glare. At least today's event would be a distraction from her pitiful love life.

The scent of jasmine wafted to Lia's nose. She breathed in deep, perhaps for the first time in a long time. Running in the rat race in the city wasn't really conducive to breathing deeply. Not with the car fumes and all.

It was beautiful here and peaceful. Besides, she'd always wanted her own horse. Maybe she'd move to the country. That would really give her father heart failure. How could he play matchmaker with her so far away? It was a nice dream, but it was expected that a dutiful Southern daughter did what was best for her family. She couldn't fight tradition, though she might have tried if things had turned out differently... Lia pushed the pointless thoughts of James out of her mind. One day a man would sweep her off her feet and she'd forget all about her night with James. Hopefully, that day would come soon.

Jimmy stood in the shade of the barn, chewing on a piece of hay and watching the limos and trucks pull up. What a joke. As if a politician who arrived in a chauffeur-driven limousine could really understand the views of a farmer who drove himself in a pickup truck hauling a horse trailer. Yeah, good luck to Jared with this little powwow.

Jack stood next to him, acting like he was incognito with his straw cowboy hat pulled low on his forehead. He needn't have worried. So far the press only had eyes, or rather camera lenses, for the politicians. To them, Jimmy and Jack were just two farmhands loafing around when they should probably be busy mucking stalls instead.

Of course, a few of the farmers they'd grown up knowing had come over to welcome them home. But everyone went rushing back to the meeting tables set up under the big trees by the house when the politicians arrived.

"Mama's been baking for two days straight. I tried to cut into one of her pies and got my butt smacked with a wooden spoon over it. I had memories of being ten again, when I cut into the pie before Christmas dinner the year Grandma and Grandpa Gordon were coming." Jack shook his head slowly as he reminisced.

Jimmy laughed. "You think you would have learned not to touch Mama's pies after that time. If I remember correctly, you couldn't sit for two days that Christmas."

Jack rubbed his butt with the memory. "I learned. I just thought that when I turned thirty Mama couldn't smack me anymore."

"Well then, boy, you still have a lot left to learn. Mama can smack you no matter how old you are."

Jack rolled his eyes beneath the brim of his cowboy hat. "I never thought I'd say this, but going back to the commander will be an improvement over living with Mama for two weeks."

Jimmy snorted. "How do you think I feel? I've been here a hell of a lot longer than you. When I first got out of the hospital, she wouldn't even let me go to the toilet. She tried to make me use a bedpan. She was going to help me do it too. How would you like to be thirty-four and have your mama helping you take a piss or a dump?"

"All right, you win with the worst 'living with Mama' story. It will be good to get back to the base for both of us."

"Amen." Jimmy agreed wholeheartedly on that one.

"Ooo, eee. Look at the hot number getting out of that limo. I never had me a redhead."

Jimmy looked at his brother in shock. "You've got yourself a pretty hot brunette. What the hell, Jack?"

Jack frowned. "Oh, don't get your panties in a bunch. I'm only looking. Nicki's the only girl I want. I'm just saying, I wonder if they're, you know, red all over." He waggled his eyebrows suggestively.

A horrible and wonderful image flashed through Jimmy's mind of a Brazilian bikini wax punctuated by a triangle of red curls that he'd never see again. "They are."

Jack opened his eyes wide. "Whoa. Tell me everything."

"No." Then he turned away to make sure Jack knew he wasn't going to kiss and tell.

That's when Jimmy saw her and nearly choked on the piece of straw he'd been chewing on. Next to the limo stood the woman his brother, Jack, had been ogling. His redhead. Lia. His throat felt so dry he

didn't think he'd ever be able to swallow again. His pulse pounded so loudly he wouldn't be surprised if Jack heard it.

Even though Jimmy's world had suddenly stopped dead at the sight of Lia, the rest of the universe kept on going. At that point, everyone who was expected must have arrived, because Jared walked up to the podium and began speaking into the microphone he'd borrowed from the Rotary Club. Jimmy had no idea what his brother was saying. He only had eyes for Lia, who was escorted by the same VIP she'd been with at the party. Was she his press secretary or something? The thought that Lia could have been dating some older-than-dirt politician at the same time she'd had amazing sex with him made Jimmy ill.

Jared announced the names of a whole bunch of people Jimmy had no interest in. Finally, Jared got to the old guy and Lia and introduced them as Governor Carrington and—holy shit—his lovely daughter, Amelia.

"Hey, doesn't the hot redhead look kinda familiar? Where have I seen her before?" Jack was staring at the podium too. When Jimmy didn't answer, he turned to him. "Jimmy. Hey, you all right?"

Not trusting his voice, Jimmy nodded as his brother continued to frown at him until recognition set in and Jack's eyes bulged out of his head. "The redhead at that party. The night you went AWOL to get laid at the Hilton. Holy crap, Jimmy. You had sex with the governor's daughter?"

"Shhh." Jimmy hissed and glanced around to see if any of the farmhands were near enough to hear them. "And how the hell do you know about where I was that night? Goddamn gossiping Matt."

"Don't blame Matt. He's usually a vault when it comes to this kind of stuff. But I know the combination to the vault. Bourbon." Jack was smiling now. "So *she's* how you know redheads are red all over." He shook his head in disbelief. "Did you know whose daughter she was when you were ah, you know?"

"No." Jimmy ran his hands over his face. This was a mess. Of all the many, many times he imagined seeing Lia again, it was never like this.

Jack snorted. "Like knowing would have stopped you. Who are you kidding? Look at her. She could have been the devil's own daughter and you still would have done it."

Jimmy certainly wasn't kidding himself about it. Jack was right. He wouldn't have cared who she was at that point. In fact, it probably would have made it even more exciting since he had no love of the current administration. The question was what the hell was he going to do now? Hiding came to mind. So did grabbing her behind the big-ass limo parked by the house and kissing the hell out of her.

He'd have to make up his mind between the two somehow and soon, because it appeared as if Jared was about to give the entire group a tour of the barns, and walking next to his brother was none other than Amelia Monroe-Carrington herself.

Chapter Six

Lia walked toward one of the horse barns for the grand tour alongside Jared Gordon, heir apparent of Gordon Equine. He was handsome, polite and he lived and breathed horses. She could tell that about him already. Although, after a few long boring dinners with the senator's son where he talked of nothing but his political aspirations, horses would be a nice change of topic.

She glanced sideways at the young Mr. Gordon. Too bad when she pictured getting hot and sweaty with a man, it was always James who came to mind. Hmm. Come to think of it, this guy reminded her a bit of James. Same warm brown hair with golden highlights. Same hazel eyes swirled with flecks of gold and green. Same drawl in his speech. But the one big dissimilarity, the deal-breaker, was the fact that when she looked at Jared, her heart didn't pump until she felt dizzy. Not like it did when she'd seen James standing in the hallway in front of the elevator that led to the presidential suite that night so many months ago. She sighed at the memory.

How pitiful was she? In fact, it was all she could do to prevent herself from searching through her old cell-phone bills online to try to find James's phone number so she could call him. Did they even list incoming numbers on there? Maybe she should check.

Amelia Monroe-Carrington, calling a man. This must be what happened when a woman turned thirty. What was that statistic? Something like a woman was more likely to get hit by a truck than married after the age of thirty? Humph. She could get married tomorrow if she wanted to, but thinking about who the candidate was, she'd rather get hit by a truck.

Jared was now explaining something about his philosophies regarding natural breeding versus artificial insemination, all of which were going right over her head. Lia smiled and nodded politely, a skill she'd perfected young. She was doing a good job of pretending she knew what he was talking about until she glanced up and spotted a man who literally knocked her right off her designer pumps.

Just as she was about to take a header in the dirt, James treated her to the crooked smile she remembered so well from that night and caught her by both arms. "Careful there, darlin'."

"You all right?" Jared was right next to her in an instant. She managed to nod a response to his question as she began to tremble simply from being in James's presence again. Lia stared up at him for what seemed like an eternity as Jared continued. "Miss Carrington. This is my oldest brother, Jimmy, and my second oldest brother, Jack."

Jared made the introductions that delivered the second shock of the day. James was a Gordon as in Gordon Equine? She finally managed to break her gaze from *Jimmy's* face to discover the man next to him, the one under the big cowboy hat, was actually the cleavage-gazing bartender from the party where she'd met James...uh...Jimmy.

She looked back to Jimmy. Gathering her composure, she straightened her spine and extended her hand. "A pleasure to meet you." Her voice may have been cordial, but she sincerely hoped her narrowed eyes said what she was really thinking. That being, what the hell were two successful horse breeders doing playing at being waitstaff miles away and why hadn't James...or rather Jimmy, called her?

"We're going to take a tour of the breeding barns. You two want to tag along?" Jared invited his brothers, not knowing what their mere presence was doing to her. Torn between wanting to never let him out of her sight again and wanting to be as far away from him as she could get, Lia waited.

"It would be my pleasure." Jimmy smiled, which seemed to be the default expression for him, his gaze never leaving her face. He extended his bent arm to her. "Miss Amelia?"

Lia swallowed and placed her hand in the crook of his warm, muscular arm. She only nodded. At the moment, she wasn't sure her voice would function.

The group moved on and Jimmy made a show of following, but it wasn't long before she found herself pulled off into a deserted part of the barn.

Alone together, he grabbed her face with both hands and kissed her. To her horror, she responded by kissing him back until she was breathless. She enjoyed it until the relief over seeing him again was replaced with the anger and hurt she'd been harboring for six months.

She pulled away and swatted at his arm with her hand. "You stop that. I'm mad at you. Why didn't you call me? You bastard."

Oh, well, so much for acting cool and aloof.

A fly probably would have bothered him more than her smacking had. All he did was capture both of her hands easily in his and kiss them, one by one.

Smirking, he tilted his head to one side. "Ah, darlin', I wanted to. Believe me. I hate to say it, but we both know what that night together was. You're the governor's daughter. If I had called, you probably would have changed your phone number and gotten a restraining order."

Lia disengaged herself from his grasp and folded her arms. "That's not true." If it were, he'd never have been able to inflict six months of torture on her. "You don't know me at all."

Jimmy stepped in closer and pinned her between him and a wall of stacked hay bales. He leaned down, put his hands lightly on her waist and kissed his way lightly down her neck.

"Sure I know you. I know the cute little way you snore when you fall asleep after making love. I know you have a tiny tattoo of a heart on your right ass cheek, and now that I'm aware of who you are, I'm

pretty sure Daddy knows nothing about.” His voice dipped lower and if possible, got even sexier. “I know exactly how to touch you to make you come.”

Her insides rebelled against her and twisted with need, with want, for him. “Okay. Enough. I get it.”

He smiled wickedly. “You’re right, darlin’. Less talking, more kissing.”

With that, he dropped his head low and she let him kiss her again. *Let him.* Who was she kidding? She loved him kissing her. There was no letting about it. It wasn’t as if she was an unwilling participant. Running her hands up under his shirt, she remembered exactly how good it felt to touch him. She couldn’t stop the sound of pleasure that escaped her.

This kiss had affected him too. He groaned and pressed closer against her. She felt the bulge in his jeans and the need inside her grew.

“Oh, darlin’. You have no idea how good you feel.”

As charming as this country setting was, she wished they were back at the Hilton on that big bed. She braced her hands against his chest, hoping to hold back both her desire and the advance of his head toward hers. “We can’t do this here.”

“Not true at all. *Here* in this very hay room is where I lost my virginity, darlin’,” Jimmy’s casually delivered revelation left Lia insanely jealous of whoever that lucky girl was, even though she was probably fat and married with a minivan full of snot-nosed kids by now.

The sound of voices got louder as the group began moving back toward their hiding place. Jimmy dropped one last kiss on her lips and released her. “You better get back.”

She nodded but wasn’t convinced her legs would work to get her back to where she was supposed to be.

Luckily, he wasn’t ready to release her yet anyway. His hand curled around the back of her neck. “When can I see you again?”

Unable to believe what she was about to say, Lia couldn’t stop her laugh. “Call me.”

He treated her to a dimple-filled grin. “Don’t worry, darlin’. This time I will.”

Leaving him and his oh-so-tempting, hard-all-over body by the bales of hay, Lia moved to the doorway and waited, then slipped in behind the rear of the group unnoticed. Unnoticed that is, by everyone except for the other mysterious Gordon brother, Jack, who winked at her with the same crooked smile Jimmy wore so often.

Ignoring Jack, she tried not to appear too self-conscious as she ran a finger around the edge of her probably smeared lipstick. Lipstick she could fix, but there was nothing she could do about the blush that crept into her cheeks or the Gordon man who’d crept into her heart.

The phone in her purse vibrated. She hung back behind the other visitors and flipped it open. “Hello?”

“Hey, darlin’. See, I’m calling.”

She laughed, feeling like a teenager again. He'd kept her phone number all this time. Somehow, that made up for the fact he hadn't called before. "Yes, so I see. Thank you. I'll talk to you later."

"Count on it."

Jimmy ended the call on his cell phone just as he saw Jack saunter into the room.

"Well, well, well. You might want to wipe that lipstick off before you go have pie with the governor, big brother."

Jimmy scowled and wiped at his mouth. A man couldn't even find any privacy in the hay room anymore. But come to think of it, Jack had walked in on some pretty sticky situations a few times in their teen years too. At least Jimmy was alone for this unwelcome interruption. He thought about how he hadn't been alone just a minute ago and smiled. It seemed the doc had been right. His dick wasn't broken after all. It just needed the right motivation. Lia sure filled that bill. He resisted the urge to adjust himself in his jeans until he was alone.

Jack shook his head. "You got it bad."

Jimmy didn't answer, but instead wiped one last time at his mouth to make sure there was no more lipstick.

"Let's go get some pie, little brother." He couldn't wait to be near Lia again, even if they had to pretend in front of the others that they hadn't spent one hell of a night six months ago getting to know one another in the carnal manner.

"Uh huh. Pie. Is that what you're calling it nowadays?"

That smart-ass remark earned Jack a punch in the arm as Jimmy tried to wipe the I-just-made-out-with-your-daughter-in-the-barn smile off his face before he had to sit down with the governor.

The press had taken all their shots and left so Jimmy didn't worry when he, Jack and Jared, being the three Gordon men, were seated at the same table as Governor Carrington, Lia and, as much as he dreaded it, Senator Dickson. He'd been referred to on base not so affectionately as Dickhead ever since he tried to shut them down in the name of budget cuts. Asshole.

Jimmy tried to keep his mind on Lia and stay in his happy place so he wouldn't beat the senator to a pulp when the dick brought up the subject of the state budget over pie.

"I have to stick to my assertion that if we could cut money from the defense budget, this administration would have the funds to support small farmers like yourselves," Dickhead spouted.

Jimmy felt his face getting hot. He glanced over to find Jack clenching a fork in his fist so tightly his knuckles were getting white.

"I have to disagree with you, Senator." The comment from Lia had Jimmy's ears perking up as he turned in his chair to hear what she had to say. She laid down her fork and continued. "Unfortunately, I

don't think the sympathies of the general voting public and certainly not of the large corporations or lobbyists lie with America's small farmers. Given that, the Senate will never allocate funds for them no matter how much is cut from the defense budget. You know as well as I, it doesn't work that way. You can't shuffle money from one budget line directly to that of another."

Her speech had Jimmy's heart swelling with pride. Actually, after seeing her put the senator in his place, other parts of him were starting to swell too. He always had found intelligence in a woman really hot.

The senator blanched at Lia's remarks, but being a scumbag politician he managed to pull himself together quickly. He pasted a phony smile on his lying face. "What a charming naiveté you display, my dear. I'm sure once you and my son are married, you'll become more familiar with the complex inner workings of politics. Though I hope you'll be too busy giving me grandchildren instead."

Jimmy was barely aware of Jack choking on his iced tea next to him. He was too busy trying to not lose his own pie all over the table after what the senator had just said. He looked at Lia, vainly hoping for her to deny what Dickhead had said. How could she have kissed him like that in the hay room and then told him to call her if she was engaged to the senator's son?

Her face turned bright red as she glanced quickly at him then back to her future father-in-law.

Father-in-law. Jimmy's brain nearly exploded at that thought.

"Senator, I must remind you—" Lia began, but was cut off by her father the governor.

"Amelia, dear. We're not here to discuss the defense budget. Mr. Gordon, perhaps we should begin the agenda for our discussions so these very busy farmers can get back to their business."

Enough of this crap. This farmer was leaving now. Jimmy stood. "I'll let y'all get to your meeting. Governor. Senator." He nodded and strode as fast as he could away from the woman he apparently was never destined to have in his life.

He heard footsteps and suddenly Jack was beside him, grabbing his arm as he strode toward the kitchen door of the house. "Jimmy."

Jimmy shook off his brother's hand. "Stay away from me, Jack."

Jack was smart enough to back off, but Jimmy's torture was not over yet. He'd barely gotten upstairs to his room when his cell phone rang. He looked at the display and recognized Lia's number. She must have gotten his off her list of incoming calls. He dropped the phone on the bed, unanswered.

He pulled his duffle bag out of the closet and began shoving clothes inside. He tucked his precious doctor's note inside too, zipped up the bag and flung it over his shoulder. He'd find his mama, say goodbye and then grab one of the trucks. There was no way he could wait for Jack to drive him back to the base when he left two days from now. All he knew was he couldn't get away from here, and her, fast enough. The problem was, he couldn't run away from his feelings as easily.

Chapter Seven

Lia kept seeing the expression on Jimmy's face when he heard the senator, that pompous ass, say she was marrying his son. As if that was going to happen. She couldn't even imagine what Jimmy thought of her for kissing him in the barn if she was engaged to someone else. Actually she could guess what he thought and it wasn't good.

If he'd only answer the damn phone and let her explain everything would be fine, but he wasn't answering her calls. There was one good thing that had come out of all this. Lia tried to keep her spinning mind focused on the thought that Jimmy must care a little bit about her if he was this upset over the thought of her with someone else.

In the meantime, this eternal meeting was still dragging on. She kept her eyes peeled for Jimmy around the farm for the next hour. She even pretended she needed to use the restroom and had practically searched the first floor of the house for him before she ran into Lois Gordon and had to feign being lost. Now her father and the senator both looked like they were getting ready to leave and she still had yet to find Jimmy to explain. Fine, she'd just leave the explanation that she wasn't engaged in his voicemail if she had to. Of course, he would probably delete her message without listening to it. Men could be so stubborn.

Then again, maybe she wouldn't have to leave a message because suddenly his brother Jack was in front of her. "Looks like your *father-in-law* is itching to go. I guess there's a limit to how much slumming a man like that can handle in one day. Is that what you're doing with my brother, darlin'? Slumming? Because I got to tell ya', he deserves way better than that."

She bit the inside of her lip and took all of Jack's insults in silence until he finally shut up. "Are you done?"

He gazed at the sky for a moment as if thinking before focusing again on her. "Uh, yup. I think that about covers it."

"Fine. Now it's my turn. First of all, it's not any of your business, but since you're Jimmy's brother I will tell you. I'm not engaged to the senator's son. The senator may want us together but it's not going to happen. I've had dinner with John alone a total of two times and that was because I couldn't think of a way to get out of it. And you know what, if your brother was so into me, he should have called me months ago."

Lia's heart pounded as she wound up for quite a rant of her own. Since the Gordon she wanted to yell at wasn't here at the moment, this one would have to do. "In addition, I've been calling your brother's

phone for an hour now to explain all this to him and he won't answer. So go get him from wherever he's hiding and I'll tell him in person."

Jack watched her closely, as if deciding what to do with her. "No can do."

She sighed her frustration. "Why not?"

"Because he's gone." The Gordon brother delivered that news with such certainty that she couldn't doubt it was true.

"Gone where?" He couldn't be too far. Where was there to go around here?

"He went back home." Jack's answer did nothing but confuse her.

Lia frowned. "Home? Isn't this home?"

Jack hesitated just a bit before answering. "Not exactly."

He scratched his head and screwed up his face as if the answer had been a hard one for him. Where a person lived shouldn't be difficult to answer, unless there was something more than meets the eye.

"What's going on, Jack? Who are you two? It's pretty obvious you're not waiters. Now I'm starting to doubt you're farmers either."

"Shit." Jack shook his head. "This is something you have to discuss with him."

She wanted to rip out her hair and scream from sheer frustration. "That's what I'm trying to tell you. He won't take my calls."

Jack huffed out a breath and then took out his cell phone. He punched in some numbers then raised it to his ear. "Hey, it's me. I know you're in no mood to talk, but you might wanna listen. Your girl here says she's not engaged to Dickhead's son. She's here next to me and she wants to talk to you. Okay?"

Your girl. She kind of liked that. And *Dickhead*? Good name, she liked that too.

Jack thrust the phone at her. "Talk quick. He's not in a good mood."

She grabbed it and spoke fast before Jimmy hung up on her. "I'm not engaged to John Dickson. I'm not even dating him. The senator and my father have been trying to fix us up for years. I don't want to be with him, Jimmy. I don't even like him."

He was silent for a moment and then she heard him say, "Where do you live, Lia?"

"At the governor's mansion with my parents." She knew that sounded pitiful. Thirty years old and still living with her parents, but it was a really nice mansion. No wonder her father still had so much control over her life. She made it easy for him.

Jimmy snorted out a bitter-sounding laugh. "That figures."

"Hey! I have my reasons." She'd initially stayed living at home after college graduation because her grandfather was living with them. She was the apple of his eye and knew she wouldn't have long enough with him once they diagnosed the lung cancer. Then she'd stayed because her mother had been ill and her father needed her. But somehow even though Granddad was gone and her mother was fine, Lia was still there.

“Whatever. Call me when you get home later. Your *mansion* isn’t too far from my hovel. Maybe we can meet somewhere.” Jimmy invitation was delivered in a voice that told her he may be talking to her, but he still wasn’t happy.

Meeting him so they could talk was what she wanted, but the way he had suggested it was not so great. Right now though, she’d take anything she could get. “Okay. I’ll call you when I get back.”

“Fine.”

The sudden dead air that met her ear told her he’d ended the call without even a goodbye. She really did feel like a teenager with a crush, and now she was remembering why she’d hated her teen years so much. They had just plain sucked and her thirties weren’t looking much better.

Lia handed the phone back to Jack. “Thanks.”

Jack stashed the phone in his jeans’ pocket, then leaned back against the pristine hood of the limo as the driver shot him a nasty look. “I just have one thing to say to you, darlin’. Don’t you go to him if you’re only going to hurt him later. Promise me that. He’s been through too much already.”

At least one of the Gordon brothers was still calling her darlin’, since it seemed Jimmy wasn’t any longer. But what was Jack referring to? Curiosity got the better of her and she couldn’t help but ask.

“What has Jimmy been through, Jack?”

He shook his head. “That story’s not mine to tell.”

After tipping his hat at her, he strode away. She watched him all the way to the barn where he was joined by a woman who’d just driven up the driveway in a Gordon Equine truck. She’d parked near the barn and run to him. He lifted the brunette up and kissed her enthusiastically while swinging her in a circle.

Lia’s heart twisted with envy. She wanted that kind of love. A man had never greeted her that way, though she had a feeling Jimmy, like his brother, was the kind of man who would. These guys were so much deeper than she’d given them credit for. Maybe she was the shallow bitch they thought she was.

She sighed and went to find her father. The quicker they got back to the city, the sooner she could get to Jimmy and work on smoothing things over. It was time to move on with her own life.

Jimmy hadn’t been in his apartment since the day he’d left for Kosovo six months before. Luckily he shared it with Jack, so except for the now-sour milk in the fridge Jack had forgotten to pour out before he left on furlough two weeks ago, it was in pretty much the same shape Jimmy had left it. Comfy, sort of clean and home away from home.

He threw his duffle on the bed and then himself on the couch. TV remote in hand, he decided women were put on earth strictly to torture men. One minute Lia was kissing him, the next she was engaged to Senator Dickhead’s son and then an hour later she told him she wasn’t.

Now he sat like a damn girl waiting for her call. Crazy. He checked his cell phone to make sure it had a signal and was charged then shook his head at himself. *Friggin' crazy.*

The show on television held no appeal but he stared at it anyway. He guessed he dozed for a bit because the ringing of his cell phone startled him out of his sleep. Even while hating himself for being so anxious to speak with her, Jimmy still jumped to answer it. He fumbled the phone open and said hello.

"In the limo on the way home I told my father I'm never going to marry the senator's son, no matter how much he and Dickson push us together. I also told him I've already met someone else. Someone I'm very interested in." He heard her let out a short laugh. "It was a very long car ride home."

Jimmy swallowed the lump from his throat. "I can imagine it was. Did you tell him exactly who it was you met?"

He firmly tamped down his growing hope. This was a start, but he couldn't let himself think there may be a future for them. She was still the governor's daughter and he was the abandoned son of a drunken father.

"Not yet."

And there you had it. She wanted him as long as he could remain a secret. He laughed bitterly. "Yeah, that's what I thought."

"No, Jimmy. You're wrong. I didn't tell him because I want you to meet him first."

He shook his head at her excuse. "I have met him, Lia."

"I mean meet him on equal footing, with me as my date. I have to attend a black-tie cocktail party tonight. Any chance you have a tux lying around?"

She was asking him on a date. An actual in-public, meet-my-daddy date. Maybe she was serious about trying to make this thing between them work. Though he had to laugh at her tuxedo question. "Yeah, sure. My tux is hanging right next to my opera cape and ascot."

Lia ignored his joke. "You can just wear a suit then. Whatever you've got will be fine."

He sighed. There was nothing he could think of that he would enjoy less than being at this party with a bunch of rich guys in tuxes. Even terrorist torture was looking good next to this thing, but he was starting to realize if he wanted to be with this girl he was going to have to work at it. He'd have to suck it up. This party tonight was all part of the dues he'd have to pay to be with Lia, but boy would he love to not go.

Tonight would be the test, as least as far as her daddy was concerned. If he could make it through this party and survive the governor's scrutiny, they might have a chance together. Though there were more people involved here than just the governor. "Are Senator Dickhead and son going to be there?"

"Yes." He heard the hesitation in her voice. "Is that going to be a problem?"

Yes, but he'd be damned if he told Lia that. That bit of info changed everything. Now he wanted to go, if only to stake his claim for Lia. He'd knock any idea Dickhead and son had about her right out of their heads. "Nope. No problem. I'll be there. Give me the address. I'll meet you."

After hanging up with Lia, Jimmy stood in front of the open closet. Inside, covered in a dry cleaning bag, were the dress blues he hadn't worn in a long time. He hadn't gained any weight so he figured they would still fit fine. More importantly, he'd feel better wearing this than any tux or suit. But seeing Lia while wearing his uniform also meant tonight was the night he'd have to confess to her who he really was. After he'd slept with her while letting her believe he was just a waiter, and then kissed her when she believed he was a farmer, he had a feeling she wasn't going to be very happy about learning the truth.

Chapter Eight

Lia took her own car instead of riding with her father to the party. She made sure she arrived early so she could keep a vigilant watch for Jimmy's arrival. Tonight was going to be challenging enough. She didn't want him to have to be alone and feel awkward for any amount of time.

Smoothing the fabric of her black dress one more time, she realized she was feeling pretty awkward herself. Her stomach fluttered with butterflies she hadn't felt in years, and all at the thought of seeing Jimmy again. Not just seeing him, but declaring him her official date for this event to her father, the senator, John and pretty much the world as she knew it.

She prayed he'd come up with something decent to wear. Second-guessing her suggestion he wear a suit to a black-tie event, she realized she really should have arranged for a tux to be dropped off at his house. Though it was doubtful he would have accepted it from her. James Gordon didn't seem the type to take handouts gracefully. More than that, with his muscular build she doubted he would fit in anything off-the-rack anyway.

To still her jangling nerves, Lia grabbed a glass of champagne from a passing waiter's tray. After downing a big mouthful much too fast, she quickly covered her mouth to stifle the burp it caused. Thinking better of her idea of using alcohol to calm herself, she placed the half-empty glass on a nearby table and glanced again at the doorway.

Maybe she should go out front and make sure, again, that they had Jimmy's name on the guest list. She was about to do that when she noticed everyone, the women in particular, staring at the entrance. Through the crowd she saw a tall figure dressed in the unmistakable uniform of the Marine Corps. He stood for a moment in the doorway, and then took off his hat. He clutched it in his hand as he surveyed the room. Then he spotted her and slowly smiled.

Recovering from the initial shock, if not from the fluttering in her heart, she smiled back before making her way across the room. When she finally stood directly in front of him, she raised a hand and touched one of the many medals pinned to his chest. "Wow." Her voice sounded breathy to her own ears.

Jimmy took her hand in his and planted a light kiss on her fingertips. "Hey, darlin'."

She drew in a shaky breath, her gaze rising from the spectacular sight of the uniform to the face of the amazing man inside of it. "Well, this brings to mind about as many questions as it does answers."

His expression turned contrite. "I'm sorry, darlin'. I know I owe you a lot of explaining. Later, in private. Can you wait until then?"

Lia could wait for an explanation, but not for a kiss. The buildup of sexual frustration within her couldn't be denied any longer. She'd lived like a nun for months. Her body remembered too well what Jimmy could do to her and it demanded satisfaction. The uniform had initially been a shock, but now the sight of him in it was really starting to get to her. Who knew she had a thing for a man in uniform? Although maybe it was just this man in particular, uniform or not.

Smiling wickedly, she stepped closer and lightly ran her hands up and down his chest. "I'll wait for us to talk, yes, but not for other things. Do you think there's a coat closet around here somewhere?"

Grinning, he stilled her hands with his. "You'll have to wait for that too, darlin'. But I don't think I can wait for a drink. I'm such a bundle of nerves I'm practically shaking." He hooked her arm through the crook of his elbow and led her toward the bar.

"Why are you nervous?" She glanced at him as they walked and her gaze caught on his medals and ribbons. Judging by the number, he'd been in a while and seen a lot. Certainly a lot more frightening things than a black-tie cocktail party.

Jimmy covered her hand with his and gave it a small squeeze. "Because I'm officially meeting my girl's daddy."

Her heart melted right there in a little puddle on the floor and she fought to not tear up. "I like being your girl."

"Good." He treated her to his crooked smile.

They paused near the bar, so she took the opportunity to stand on tiptoe and kiss him.

Jimmy's eyes drifted closed for a second. He groaned and pulled his lips from hers. "Don't get me started, darlin'. I'll embarrass myself."

She liked knowing he couldn't resist her as much as she liked being his girl. Suddenly, her continuing to plan her life around the incessant round of political cocktail parties to please her father seemed absurd. This was not her place or her responsibility. Her mother was the other half in the Monroe-Carrington political dynasty, not Lia.

Through misty eyes she noticed her lipstick smeared on Jimmy's mouth. Reaching up, she wiped it from his lips. "Let's get out of here."

His eyes opened wide. "Now? I didn't even speak with your daddy yet."

Frustrated, Lia sighed. He was right of course. She'd invited Jimmy here for a reason. Them sneaking out before meeting her father so she could jump him made no sense. "Okay. We'll go talk to my father. Then you're taking me to your place."

He laughed. "I'm warning you, darlin'. It's base housing. It's no mansion."

"I don't care, as long as you're in it."

He touched her face lightly, his eyes looking suspiciously misty as well. "Then let's go find your daddy."

Lia dreaded this meeting with every fiber of her being, but with Jimmy next to her and the promise that they could leave and be alone together as soon as it was over, she faced it bravely.

Her father's eyebrows couldn't have risen any higher into his receding hairline when she introduced them.

Fortunately, he didn't have a chance to comment since Senator Dickson walked up at the same moment. "Governor. Lia. And whom might this be?"

Lia smiled sweetly, enjoying this probably a bit too much. "Senator, I'd like to introduce you to my date. Actually, my boyfriend, James Gordon. You may remember him from Gordon Equine this afternoon."

The senator's mouth dropped open just as his son joined them. With a soaring heart, Lia repeated the introduction to John Dickson III and watched his face react in kind. Taking control of her life and her future had been far easier and much more satisfying than she'd ever imagined.

When they arrived at Jimmy's apartment shortly after, Lia felt like they were two kids who'd just snuck out of the prom to fool around.

"I still can't get out of my head the expression on the senator's face when you introduced me as your boyfriend." He grabbed her and gave her butt a squeeze. "You enjoyed telling him that. Didn't you?"

"Yes. So?" She scowled. "He deserved it after he called me naïve today in front of all those men at your farm. And you should talk about enjoying things. You nearly crushed John's hand when you shook it. Tell me you didn't love doing that."

"Can I help it if I don't know my own strength?" Jimmy shrugged. "And in my own defense, he was trying and failing to crush mine first."

She laughed and started to unbutton his jacket. "Why don't you show me how strong you are right now?"

"Gladly, darlin'." He groaned, deep and low in his throat and then scooped her up into his arms. Jimmy carried her to the bedroom and laid her gently on the bed. Under the moonlight streaming through the window, they undressed each other. Once they were naked on top of the covers he pulled her close and held her tight. She fit perfectly. Being in his arms again felt like coming home.

Tempted to rush things by the overwhelming need about to explode inside her, she reached for and grasped the hard length of him. His hand grabbed hers. He raised it above her head and held it there as he took his time exploring her face and throat with his mouth. Admittedly, she enjoyed every sensation as he kissed her thoroughly, but she needed so much more.

"I want you now." She wrapped one leg around his hip and pressed closer.

Jimmy nipped gently at her earlobe. His warm breath against her skin sent a tingle straight through her. "You'll get what you want, when I want."

"You are an extremely frustrating man, James Gordon."

He covered her pout with his lips, soothing her bad mood with the thrust of his tongue.

Angling her body, she managed to press just the tip of him against her entrance. She felt him laugh against her mouth as he kissed her, even as he pulled his pelvis away far enough to break contact.

Finally, he raised his mouth from hers. "I couldn't get you off my mind, not for even a day, the whole time we were apart all those months."

His confession brought fresh tears to her eyes. She tried to joke them away. "Neither could I, and believe me I tried. It really pissed me off."

He released his hold on her hand and stroked her face. "You don't have to try anymore because I'm right here."

"Yes, you are, and do you think you could make love to me now? I've waited a very long time for you, James Gordon, and I don't usually have to wait for anything."

He smiled. "I bet you don't. I guess I could see clear to giving in to your request, since you asked so nicely and all."

After quickly donning a condom he got from the bedside table drawer, Jimmy kept his eyes open and gazed into hers when he slid inside her. They'd already had a night of wild, passion-filled sex six months before. She could honestly say this time felt even more wonderful. They moved together as one, slowly, tenderly. It was so different than their first time together. That had been sex, this was definitely making love. Lia hadn't truly known the difference before. She did now.

Her body tightened around him. Jimmy drew in a sharp breath in response and pressed tighter against her. She clung to him as she felt the climax coil within until it snapped, sending spasms of pleasure through every part of her body.

"Ah, yes." Jimmy's breath and pace quickened as he came right after her. He shuddered with the last of his orgasm and with his face pressed against the pillow next to her head, he blurted, "I love you."

Her eyes flew open. She couldn't help the reaction. His unexpected postcoital confession had come as a total shock. He looked as surprised that he'd said it as she was hearing it. He groaned and tried to roll away. "I'm sorry. That was way too soon. Forget I said it. I take it back."

Tightening her arms like a vise around him, Lia prevented him from moving off her.

"Yes, it is too soon, but don't you dare take it back." She smiled and squeezed his rib cage hard until he let out a pain-filled wheeze.

"Oh, my God. I'm sorry. Did I hurt you? How could I hurt you? You're so big and strong."

He let out a short laugh and gently pulled her arms from around his rib cage.

"It's all right, darlin'." He blew out a slow, controlled breath. "There's some stuff I have to tell you and I think now is as good a time as any."

Lia lay next to Jimmy and listened as he talked. He told her everything that had happened over the past six months, at least everything he was allowed to. There was a lot that was confidential, but she didn't care about that part. It didn't matter to her where in the world he'd been or why. What was most important

to her was that there was a very real reason why he hadn't been able to be with her before now. Even more touching was that he had wanted to be with her each and every day they'd been apart.

Listening to his voice in the darkened room as he sat propped up against the headboard with his arm around her shoulders, she could barely comprehend all he said. He talked about atrocities with a distance that belied the events that had happened to him. She was certain he was giving her only the tip of the iceberg. For what he told her, for what she knew he still hid from her, her eyes brimmed with tears.

She cried over how he'd been hurt and tortured. She cried out of guilt because she'd hated him for not contacting her even though he'd had no choice in the matter. And she cried that he hadn't felt he could call her when he'd finally come home to heal.

"That's pretty much all I can tell you. I didn't want to start off with secrets between us." He reached out and brushed the tears from her cheeks. More fell in their place.

"I'm so sorry, Jimmy."

He shook his head. "None of it's your fault, darlin'."

"But I wish I could have been there for you."

"You were. I thought about you constantly while I was there and afterward when I was home. I made love to you thousands of times in my mind." His laugh held a touch of embarrassment. "And quite a few of those times I imagined telling you I loved you."

"Which is why you said it before." Lia felt her heart ache. He was in love with the image of her in his head, the one he had clung to during the horrors he'd been through. He wasn't in love with the real her.

"Probably." Jimmy pulled her closer and touched his lips to each eyelid.

It didn't matter. He'd grow to love the real her. She'd make sure he did. Lia moved over him, straddling his thighs with her own. She grabbed his face in both hands and kissed him hard. She felt his growing erection beneath her. "Make love to me again?"

Groaning, he rolled her onto her back. "My pleasure."

Chapter Nine

Jimmy opened his eyes and stretched. Judging by the sun it must be late morning and he'd actually slept really well once they'd gotten to sleep. He looked down at Lia next to him and smiled. She was the reason they'd been up until the wee hours making love, and the reason he'd slept better than he had in months.

It felt good waking up next to her. It felt right. And then his blissful bubble was broken when he heard the front door open and voices in the living room. A moment later, his bedroom door burst open and Jack flipped the light switch on.

"Jeez, Jack. Close the friggin' door. I'm not alone."

Lia, apparently not fast to wake, sat up sputtering. "Wha-what's going on?"

Jack's eyes bulged as the sheet fell away from Lia's naked breasts. Jimmy's hand shot out and pulled it back up to cover her, but not before Nicki, who'd just walked in and taken stock of the scene, smacked Jack.

"God, Jack. Give them some privacy." She practically yanked him out by the ear and pulled the door shut.

"You better get your naked butt out here, big brother." Jack's voice came through the closed door. "You're in deep shit. Don't be surprised if the next person to come a knockin' is the commander."

Uh oh. What now? He glanced down at the still-groggy Lia. "I better go out there and see what's up."

Sleepy and tousled and looking far too tempting, she nodded. Jimmy hopped out of bed before he lost interest in Jack and whatever bad news he had to deliver in favor of staying in bed with Lia. He pulled on a pair of PT shorts and a T-shirt and went to investigate what the hell Jack was so flustered about.

He didn't have long to wait. The moment he entered the living room, Jack flung a newspaper on the table and pointed to the front page. "Take a gander at this."

The headline above the full-page photo of him and Lia kissing outside of the party last night read, *Mystery Military Man Smooches Miss Monroe-Carrington.*

Jimmy groaned "Aww, shit."

"You gotta give them credit for creativity, getting all those Ms lined up like that. The press will do anything for a witty headline, but yeah, shit is right. Good thing you had your hat on and it hid your face. They haven't figured out who you are yet, but you keep seeing her and they'll figure it out soon enough. Jesus, Jimmy. You gotta fall for the governor's daughter? The commander is going to shit a brick. Dating

her will mean your face will be in the paper all the time. You can forget about going undercover ever again. Your career will be over.”

Jimmy shook his head. “I don’t care. I’ll leave the team if they ask me to. I’m staying with Lia.”

“I won’t let you sacrifice your career for me, Jimmy.”

He turned and saw her standing in the bedroom doorway wearing his shirt from last night. The sight only served to steel his stance. “It’s not your decision, darlin’. My mind is made up. I’ll change and go see the commander right now.”

She shook her head and was about to protest when he walked to her, laid one finger over her lips and then kissed her. “I know what I’m doing. Trust me.”

“I do.”

“Good.”

She followed him into the bedroom and sat silently on the edge of the bed while he got changed into clothes appropriate for begging forgiveness from your commander. That was it. He couldn’t procrastinate any longer. “Guess I better get going. Will you be here when I get back?”

“Do you want me to be?”

“Yes.” Today and for every day after that.

Lia nodded. “Then I’ll be here.”

He led her to the bedroom door by the hand. Before he left, she kissed him with tears in her eyes. After that, he didn’t worry any more about the fact that he might be forced to leave Task Force Zeta. It would be worth it to have her in his life.

When Jimmy glanced back into the living room, Jack was sprawled on the couch and Nicki was in the kitchen filling the coffee pot with water.

Jimmy frowned. “Don’t let Nicki make the coffee. She’s a guest. Get off your lazy butt and go do it yourself.”

Jack turned and watched Nicki with a grin. “She’s Italian. Do you really think she’s going to let me anywhere near the kitchen? Ain’t that right, darlin’.”

Nicki laughed. “Have you tasted Jack’s coffee? Don’t worry about it, Jimmy. You’ve got enough on your mind right now.”

Jack stood up and moved closer. “Yeah, Jimmy, about that. Listen, I know you’ve got other things on your mind, but I just wanted to let you know I’m moving out.”

Jimmy groaned and ran a hand over his face. He wasn’t sure he had it in him to deal with this now. “Jeez, Jack. I’m sorry I snapped at you before, but it’s nothing to move out over.”

Jack broke into a crooked grin. “You know me better than that, bro. If I didn’t want to go, you couldn’t get me out of here with a bulldozer. I’ve been thinking about getting my own place so Nicki and I can be alone when she’s visiting.” Jack paused long enough to glance at Nicki in the kitchen. “Carly’s

moved in with Trey, so her apartment above the bar is available. And now that you're with Miss Monroe-Carrington in there, I figure you'll be wanting the extra privacy too."

What Jack said made sense, but it still seemed like the end of an era. Jack had lived with him since the day he'd joined the team. Jimmy pulled him into a quick, back-slapping hug. "I'll still miss ya', little brother."

Jack laughed. "Jeez, one near-death experience and he's all sappy. I'll miss ya' too, big brother. Good luck with the commander. Call me the minute you get out of the meeting."

Jimmy nodded and headed out the door.

All too soon, he was at the base and standing in the commander's open doorway.

"Sir? May I speak with you?" Jimmy had both the newspaper and his note from the doc rolled up in his hand. He only hoped he would need the second after he showed the commander the first.

"Gordon. Come on in. It's good to see you back, son."

The question remained, was he back to stay? Jimmy swallowed and tried to gather his nerve. Oh, boy. This was going to be tough.

"Sir. I have to show you something. I want you to know, if you want my resignation after seeing it, I'll give it to you."

He unrolled the paper and laid it on the desk facing his superior officer. The commander read it aloud, then sat quietly for a moment. "Well I have to say, *that* headline is far more creative than the one I read."

Reaching under his desk, the commander pulled a different paper out of the garbage and pushed it toward Jimmy.

Dickson's Fiancée and ???

"She was never engaged to Senator Dickson's son, sir."

"Oh, good. That makes it all right then." The commander was famous for his sarcasm. He shook his head, "Tell me this, why is it every time one of you Gordons falls in love, it's a headache for me? First your brother is pummeling Williams over that bartender..."

Jimmy raised a brow. Trey and Jack had fought over Carly? That he hadn't heard. He'd have to remember to ask.

The commander continued, "Then I'm hearing rumors about Jack's new girl being involved with the mob."

How the hell had the commander heard that? Maybe somebody had plied Matt with some bourbon. Meanwhile, the commander was still ranting.

"And now, you and the governor's daughter." He leaned way back in his chair and waited.

"I apologize, sir. I didn't know who she was the night of the mission when we met—" Jimmy's explanation was cut short by the commander's creative and colorful cursing.

"Now I recognize her. She's the redhead from the party. The night—"

“Yes, sir.” No need to rehash this again. He’d already gotten enough of a reminder about his breaking protocol from the commander the morning after and from Jack yesterday when he’d recognized Lia. “I swear, sir, I hadn’t contacted her at all after that night. We ran into each other purely by accident yesterday and that is when I found out who she is. You need to know, I’m not willing to give her up, sir. I realize undercover work is a major part of our missions and that dating a politician’s daughter will put me in the spotlight no matter how hard I try to stay out of it, which is why I’m ready to resign if you ask.”

The commander let out a frustrated sigh. “You’re a stupid man, Gordon.”

Uh, oh. Here it comes.

“You have the kind of night I heard over the comm unit with a girl who looks like that and you don’t call her?”

Jimmy couldn’t help but smile. “Yes, sir. She wasn’t happy about it either.”

“Listen, Gordon. Your undercover career was already over. You were compromised. You don’t think your face hasn’t been sent to every terrorist in the known world already?”

“I guess I hadn’t thought about it. Yes, sir, you’re right.”

“But that doesn’t mean I want you to resign. You are a valuable member of this team, with more skills than just the ability to blend with terrorists. And I’m thinking having you be the heartthrob who’s dating the governor’s daughter will make you kind of the poster boy representing all the brave, red-blooded all-American soldiers on this base. That would make it look really bad if the governor allowed Senator Dickhead to shut us down.”

“Yes, sir.” Jimmy smiled.

The commander nearly giggled, if that was possible. “I’d watch my back for a while, if I were you. Dickhead Junior is not going to be too happy about being made a fool of on the front page. Go on home, Gordon. I’ll see you tomorrow with the rest of team for a zero-eight-hundred end-of-this-fucking-furlough briefing. Oh, and if you want to marry her and pop out a few cute babies, I wouldn’t be opposed to that either. The press loves babies.”

Jimmy wouldn’t be opposed to that himself, in time. “Yes, sir. Thank you.”

He arrived home feeling far lighter than when he’d left. Dressed in a pair of his navy cotton sweatpants and a grey USMC T-shirt, Lia greeted him at the door. He lifted her in his arms and kissed her hard.

She pulled away and he saw the concern on her face. “Tell me what happened. I’ve been going crazy.”

He smiled. “Everything’s fine. Move in with me, Lia.”

“What?” She frowned and laughed at the same time.

"It felt really good coming home to you just now. I want you here like this every time I walk in that door. I know this place isn't much. If you want we can move into a bigger one, but live with me, wherever we end up."

A smile lit her face. "Okay."

"Really?"

She nodded. "Yes, really."

He squeezed her hard and then realized he was hard too. Still carrying her, he headed for the bedroom.

Lia laughed. "Is this what my life is going to be like when I live with you? Nothing but sex day and night?"

"Yup." He grinned at the thought.

She pursed her lips as if considering the idea. "I guess I can live with that."

"Good, because I was thinking maybe we could try that thing we did in the shower at the hotel again."

Her eyes opened wide and then she smirked. "You are a very bad boy. That's one of the many reasons why I love you."

He stopped mid-step. "You love me?"

"Yes, James Gordon. I do."

Lia loved him. With a whoop, Jimmy spun her in a circle while she laughed and kissed him.

He stopped their motion so he could stare into her sky-blue eyes. "That's a very good thing, darlin', because I love you too."

Since he still held her in the air, Lia was level with him. He saw the emotion in her eyes when she spoke. "I believe you really do."

"Of course I do, woman. I wouldn't have said it if I didn't mean it. Now can we go to bed?"

"Yes, unless you'd rather take me directly to the shower instead." She raised one red eyebrow prettily.

"Damn, I'm going to really like living with you." He carried her toward the bathroom attached to his room, and this time he was locking his bedroom door behind them.

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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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.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Jack:

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."

Sometimes the only way to leave the past behind is to ignore the voice of reason—and leap.

Past Promises

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Jamesville, Book 7

For Linda Fletcher, the sign in front of her new business says it all. Past Promises Antiques is her declaration of independence from her powerful and manipulative family—and a vow to herself that her future will be different.

She never considered herself the no-strings-affair type, but the chemistry between her and her newly hired handyman is too intense to ignore. Moving to Jamesville was a bold step, so what's the harm in taking one more—into his arms?

Levi Mann's shadowed past keeps his bags packed light and his feet on the move. But one look at Linda, and he finds himself willing to hang around—just long enough to figure out what it is that triggers their explosive passion.

Warning, this title contains very explicit language, a dysfunctional family, a very large inheritance and lots of wild, hot sex.

Enjoy the following excerpt for Past Promises:

"Are you okay?" A low, male voice startled her out of her daydreams of the past. Linda whirled around, hand on her chest, heart pounding.

He stood just behind her. Watching. Waiting.

She had no idea how long he'd been there. It should have been impossible for a man his size to sneak up on her. At six-and-a-half feet tall, Levi Mann took up a lot of space. His body was massive, but it was all solid muscle. There wasn't an ounce of fat on the man.

He was wearing his usual uniform of jeans and a T-shirt. The faded denim clung to his thick thighs like a second skin. The soft cotton of the shirt molded to his biceps and chest, leaving little to the imagination.

And she had imagined him. A lot.

Lying in bed late at night, Linda had wondered more than once what it would feel like to touch all that sculpted muscle. She knew what it looked like. Levi had helped her with much of the renovation work on the building, as well as the painting, often removing his shirt while he worked. She'd lost count of the number of times she'd stopped painting just to stare at him while he was working. Levi gave new meaning to the phrase abs of steel. His tanned flesh looked as though it was pulled tight over slabs of muscle.

And the man was just as potent from behind. He had wide shoulders that tapered down to his thick waist, the muscles making a perfect V. His butt was first class all the way.

“Linda?” The way he said her name gave her shivers. “Are you okay?”

Oh, God. She was standing here like a ninny, staring at him again. “I’m fine.” She shook herself and dropped the letter in the garbage. “Just thinking about things.” That was vague enough for him to drop it. In her experience, most men were just as happy to avoid lengthy, in-depth discussions with females.

Levi stared at her, his golden-brown eyes sending a shiver down her spine. He had a way of watching a person that made you think he could see all the way to your soul. Then he blinked and the moment passed. “Excited about this morning?”

She ignored the fact that his shoulder-length hair was down this morning, making him look even sexier. Usually, he kept it tied back while he worked. And there was no doubt about it. Levi was a man of action. If not for him, she’d still be working on the building instead of opening the doors on her new business.

“Excited and scared.” She laughed and motioned to the coffee pot, which had just finished perking. “Would you like a cup of coffee?”

“Sure.”

Turning her back to him, she struggled to regain her composure. He was one hot guy, no doubt about it, but she wasn’t looking for that kind of complication in her life right now.

Not that he’d come on to her in any way since she’d hired him. The arrangement they’d worked out helped them both. When she’d bought the building that housed Past Promises, it had needed a lot of sweat and elbow grease to make it livable. Which wasn’t a problem. Linda wasn’t afraid of hard labor.

The building was almost a hundred years old, three stories high and built of brick. The main floor was the retail space, but some time in the nineteen-seventies someone had converted the two upper floors into apartments. Linda had revamped the top floor for her own use. She hadn’t planned on renting out the second floor apartment until Jonah Sutter had approached her about Levi.

Jonah was married to Amanda Barrington, Amanda Sutter now, a friend of Linda’s from Vermont who had also relocated to Jamesville. Jonah had introduced her to Levi, who was looking for a place to stay and was willing to work in exchange for rent. It had saved her a bundle on the renovations. Levi could do the work of three men and there wasn’t much, if anything, he couldn’t do.

Cyndi and Shamus O’Rourke, more friends who lived in Jamesville, had pitched in to help her as well. Shamus was a partner in B & O Construction, a local contracting company, so he’d given her great advice and a good price on work when she’d needed it done.

Jonah had done his part as well, using his skill as an electrician to upgrade all the electrical work in the building. Not for the first time, she was thankful for her new friends and glad she’d made the move. The contrast between her friends and her family made her stomach ache.

It was no good to question why her parents and brother couldn’t just be happy for her. They were what they were, but she was through trying to please them.

She finished pouring the coffee into a paper cup and handed it to Levi. From past experience, she knew he took his black. Over the past few months of working together she'd gotten to know him fairly well. Or as well as anyone knew him. Levi was incredibly self-contained, keeping to himself when he wasn't working. But she'd like to think they'd become friends, of a sort.

"Thanks." Their fingers grazed as he took the coffee from her. Heat shot down her arm and her breasts tingled.

She dropped her hand and rubbed it up and down the fine wool of her dress pants. It was distressing how quickly her body reacted to Levi. It had been that way from the first moment she'd met him. All the man had to do was walk in the room and she felt her body temperature rise. She had to control herself. Levi was a friend, nothing more.

She didn't know his entire story, but she knew he'd been in the army with Jonah—Special Forces. He'd left the military and had come to Jamesville to help Jonah about six months ago and had stayed. She figured he was entitled to take some time to figure out what he wanted to do with the rest of his life.

Besides which, he was the perfect tenant. He was quiet and he'd done more than enough work to pay for at least six more months' rent. She had no idea how long he was staying and hadn't worked up the courage to ask. The last thing she wanted to do was make him think she wanted him gone.

"I think you've got your first customers waiting outside." Levi's quiet voice broke the silence between them. She looked at him and he canted his head toward the door. Sure enough, through the huge display window beside the front door, she could see Cyndi, Shamus, Amanda and Jonah waiting to get inside. All her friends had come to her opening.

Smiling, she let all thoughts of her family and her sexual feelings for Levi slip away. Plenty of time to deal with them later. Or not. Taking a deep breath, she strode across the store and unlocked the door. "Welcome to Past Promises."

Levi set his coffee on the counter the minute Linda's back was turned. Whatever was in that letter had upset her. He'd stood in the shadows watching her for several minutes before he'd spoken. He'd seen the way she unconsciously placed her hand over her stomach, the way her shoulders had hunched forward.

He didn't like it.

Reaching down, he plucked the letter out of the garbage and stuffed it in his back pocket. He'd read it later and decide if there was anything he could do to help her.

Some might consider it an invasion of privacy, but not Levi. He had skills that most people didn't and if he could use them to help someone he cared for then that's what he should do. Besides which, she'd thrown it in the trash without even tearing it up or shredding it. That made it fair game in his mind.

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