



# JARED

RED, HOT, & BLUE

CAT JOHNSON

  
SAMHAIN

Everything is just right...until she turns his life upside down.

*Red, Hot & Blue, Book 4*

It doesn't take anything fancy to make Jared Gordon a happy man. A slice of his mama's pie, a pretty girl, a well-bred horse. Life on the farm is just how he likes it. Simple. Until a big-city girl blows into town like a tornado hitting a trailer park.

Quintessentially small-town Pigeon Hollow has everything L.A. producer Mandy Morris needs for her new reality show. A smoldering deputy sheriff, a quirky diner owner and a horse farm complete with a hunky horseman. If her own instant attraction is any indication, Jared will have the female demographic glued to their sets.

Except the red-hot cowboy is cool to the idea of cameras in his face. And the harder she negotiates, the deeper he digs in...until their head-butting strikes sparks that fan a prairie fire of unexpected passion. She doesn't usually mix business with pleasure, but as Pigeon Hollow's charm works its magic, the youngest Gordon brother has Mandy rethinking many things.

Like happiness doesn't have to end with the word "cut".

Warning: Contains one hot shirtless cowboy taking a city girl for a roll in the hay...and a few other places.

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Samhain Publishing, Ltd.  
577 Mulberry Street, Suite 1520  
Macon GA 31201

Jared  
Copyright © 2011 by Cat Johnson  
ISBN: 978-1-60928-451-0  
Edited by Heidi Moore  
Cover by Angela Waters

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First Samhain Publishing, Ltd. electronic publication: May 2011  
[www.samhainpublishing.com](http://www.samhainpublishing.com)

Jared

*Cat Johnson*

# Dedication

For my editor, Heidi, who makes edits *nearly* pain free.

# Chapter One

Jared Gordon considered himself a lucky man. He had a steaming hot mug of coffee and a piece of mile-high lemon meringue pie in front of him. The diner's a/c unit pumped cool air out of the vent just above him, allowing him to forget the beastly southern summer heat outdoors. Directly opposite him sat Bobby Barton, one of his best friends and the town's deputy sheriff, which was handy in case he ever got into trouble.

Life was good until *she* walked through the door.

"Aww, shit." Jared slumped down in his seat and shielded his eyes with one hand.

Bobby glanced up from his own plate of Apple Crisp a la Mode and smirked. "You brought that one on yourself, kiddo."

Just what Jared needed at this moment in time, a smart-ass attitude. "Yeah, thanks. Nice way to be a friend, Bobby."

Bobby continued to look too amused at Jared's predicament. "You know damn well I warned you off her. She wants a wedding ring on her finger in the worst way. Hooking a successful horseman like you would have been right up her alley."

Jared risked a glance at Sue Ann, the woman in question, as she sashayed her shapely hips over to the counter. Those hips had been his downfall to begin with. Sleeping with her was a risk he should never have taken, just like daring to sneak a look at her now. He was punished for both by a wicked glare over her shoulder before she leaned in and started whispering with Misty, the waitress behind the counter. From the way they both looked at him, it was pretty obvious what the topic of conversation was.

He groaned and Bobby laughed again.

"This town is too small, Jared. You can't go fishing in the local pond if you're only going to throw your catch back after you're through with it."

Pigeon Hollow was a small town, way too small to avoid running into a pissed-off ex. Bobby was right about that much, but Sue Ann had convinced Jared she was in it for the same thing he was. Sex. Armed with that, Jared tried to defend himself. "She agreed it was just a casual thing. Just two adults scratching an itch every once in a while."

That elicited a rude noise from Bobby. "Yeah, right. Jared, what women say and what they mean are usually the exact opposite in my experience. You better give up on women and stick to horses. At least you know something about them."

“Hey, I knew enough to get the hell out of there when she started hinting marriage.” Jared wasn’t a complete idiot. He simply hadn’t anticipated her reaction to his maybe-we-should-just-be-friends speech.

“You were lucky. I wouldn’t put it past that one to try *anything* to snag herself a hubby.” Bobby raised a brow knowingly while bobbing his head with a wisdom-filled nod.

“Oh, no. I’m too smart for that. She kept telling me she was on the pill, but I still took care of things myself. With two older brothers, that message has been drilled into my head since long before I hit puberty.”

Bobby looked impressed. “Good to hear. How are Jack and Jimmy anyway?”

“They’re back at the base, happily protecting the country from the bad guys. They call a couple of times a week. It keeps Mama happy. She misses them a lot.”

“And you don’t?” Bobby looked skeptical.

“Yeah, I do. It was nice having them both home for a while.” When Jack and Jimmy had been home on leave recently, it had made Jared realize how much he missed having his brothers around. At least he still had his good old friend, Bobby.

“Well, do me a favor. Next time they’re coming home for a visit, can you give me some notice? It seems trouble follows those two around.”

“I’ve often thought that myself.” Jared laughed. “I’ll be sure to let you know.”

He watched Sue Ann still chatting up the waitress and wondered if he ever dared eat here again. Since this was the only diner around for miles, his choices were pretty limited. Of a more immediate concern, he figured the chances of getting a refill on his coffee today were slim to none.

After glancing into his near empty mug, Jared looked up at Bobby. “What day does your sister, Lizzie, waitress here?”

“Why?” Bobby frowned. His voice held a deep, menacing tone.

Bobby was very protective of his little sister. Jared couldn’t really blame him. Lizzie Barton was the single mother of a nine-year-old son. Jared also knew—hell, everybody did—that there was a bit of history between the Bartons and the Gordons. Jared’s brother Jack and Bobby’s other sister, Mary Sue, had had some wild times back in high school. However, Mary Sue was not the sister in question here and as far as Jared knew, no Gordon man had ever messed with Lizzie Barton.

“Relax. Jeez, Bobby. You know she’s like a sister to me too. I just figure it may not be safe to come here for a while unless Lizzie serves me since you-know-who is so chummy with the other waitress.” Jared kept his voice low and cocked a head in the direction of Sue Ann. She turned from the counter and walked past their table with a withering glare.

Bobby’s face broke out into a grin again, which was as bad as an I told you so, maybe worse. Bobby’s eyes followed Sue Ann out the door. “Be afraid, Jared. Be very afraid.”

Jared rolled his eyes. “Thanks a lot. You’re so helpful.”

Bobby scooped the last of his pie into his mouth, slurped one more sip of coffee and stood. Digging into his pocket, he threw some cash on the table. "If it's safe to leave you unprotected from the woman scorned, I have to get back to work now."

Jared scowled. As if Bobby didn't take hour-long coffee breaks all day long, but actually he should get back to the farm himself. Jared nodded, finishing the last of his own pie.

"All right." He longed for another sip of hot coffee to go with the last few bites of pie but knew he wasn't going to get it. "Check on Lizzie's schedule for me."

He heard Bobby laughing as the door swung shut behind him.

Jared added more money to what was already on the table and was about to leave when he thought better of it. He wouldn't put it past Misty, as one of Sue Ann's closest friends, to accuse him of not paying his check. You never knew what a woman would do for another woman to get back at a man. It was practically a global conspiracy.

He gathered up the check, Bobby's cash and his own, and carried it up to the cash register. What had this world come to that a man couldn't enjoy his pie in peace without fear of retribution?

Jared had been so involved with his paranoia over Sue Ann that he'd failed to notice the stranger who now stood at the counter, tapping her foot like a jackhammer against the faded linoleum floor.

He raised a brow with interest. They didn't get many strangers in Pigeon Hollow. By the looks of her, she didn't come from any of the towns nearby either.

Firstly, she was dressed in a suit, long-sleeved jacket and all, in spite of the summer heat. Just from that he could tell she was someone who usually spent her days in an air-conditioned office somewhere. Secondly, she was so impatient she was practically vibrating. Locals knew things moved at a different pace in the South, especially in the heat of the summer.

The stranger was huffing and puffing and shooting dagger-filled looks at the waitress, who bused his table while she ignored them both at the counter. Jared was the reason they were being ignored, so he did feel a bit responsible. Being a Southern gentleman, born and bred, he decided to step in and help the stranger in need. It didn't hurt his decision that she was sexy as hell and new females were nearly non-existent around here.

Jared adjusted his cowboy hat and took a good look at her ass in that skirt as he did. "What do ya' need, darlin'?"

She spun to look at him. "You work here?"

"No, but I'll yell to Mac back there. He'll get it for you." The owner of the diner was in the kitchen cooking. Jared could see him through the opening in the wall.

"All I want is a cup of coffee to go. Since I haven't seen a Starbucks anywhere, I'd hoped I could get one here." She glanced one more time at the waitress who still hadn't acknowledged their presence.



Thinking more caffeine was probably the last thing this tightly strung babe needed, Jared nodded. “You surely can. Best coffee in town.”

He didn’t add that it was also practically the only coffee in town, if you didn’t count the McDonald’s. Fast-food coffee that came in one of those squashy Styrofoam excuses for a cup didn’t appeal to him. He liked a real mug. Something a man could wrap his hands around. Come to think of it, that was the quality he looked for in a woman too.

Jared leaned over the counter. “Hey, Mac. This little lady here wants a coffee to go.”

“Where’s Misty?” Mac’s growled response came from the back. Looking hot and cranky, he peered out of the pass-through between the kitchen and the counter.

Jared glanced at the waitress and decided not to dig his own grave any deeper with her by telling Mac she was ignoring him on purpose. “Uh, she’s busy.”

Mac grumbled his way to the front and poured coffee into a to-go cup, shoving a plastic lid, the cream and the sugar at her.

As citified and impatient as she’d acted at first, Mac’s gruffness seemed to put the stranger on her best behavior. “Thank you so much. How much do I owe you?”

“Just the coffee?” Mac asked.

“The coffee and directions, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Coffee is seventy-five. Directions are free.” Even gruff old Mac started to warm up to her.

She was a looker, in a perfect, polished, city sort of way. Sleek blonde hair, cut in what he supposed was a fashionable style. Pretty blue eyes. Perfect nails painted in pale pink with the white edges showing.

“Seventy-five cents?” She looked surprised. Jared noticed she had four single dollar bills in her hand. Four dollars for one cup of coffee? She was definitely a city person. She put one bill down on the counter and pushed it toward Mac. “Keep the change.”

“Thanks. Now where do you need to go?” Mac shoved the money in the register.

Jared took that opportunity to slide his own bill and cash onto the counter, but his hand stopped dead for a second when he heard the woman say, “Gordon Equine? It’s a horse farm. Do you know it?”

Mac raised a brow and glanced sideways at Jared. “Sure do. And what business do you have with the Gordons, pretty lady? You in the market for a stud?”

Now it was her turn to raise a brow. She pursed her lips, as if considering. “Perhaps.”

Mac laughed boisterously in his gruff voice and cocked his head in Jared’s direction. “This here fella can give you directions. I got something on the stove.”

Hmm. What could this tough cookie from the city want with him?

Jared decided not to tip his hand just yet. He gave her directions all right, the long way to the farm, which would give him just enough time to arrive right before her.

Sure, it was juvenile, but hell, you had to make your own entertainment around Pigeon Hollow. Who better to make it with than a pretty blonde stranger who might possibly be in the market for a Gordon stud?

## Chapter Two

Mandy Morris opened the door of her rental car and got a face full of viciously hot air. The interior had gotten hellishly hot even during the very few minutes she'd been in the diner.

Holding her breath to fend off the unbreathable hot air, she got in and turned the key in the ignition. She flipped the a/c on high but it would take a while before the car reached a tolerable temperature. She rolled down the window while she waited, not that outside was any less stifling.

With her hot coffee securely stashed in the cup holder, she grabbed her pad and pencil from the passenger seat and started scribbling, ticking off the ideas aloud to herself as she wrote.

"Pigeon Hollow. Interesting characters. Cook at diner, Mac. Cutie that gave directions—need to investigate him further."

She laid the pad back on the seat next to her so it would be accessible in case an idea came to her while she was driving, then gripped her coffee and took a sip. Not bad for seventy-five cents. What a difference from Los Angeles. You couldn't get the empty cup in LA for seventy-five cents, forget about the coffee inside. She shook her head with amazement.

After rolling up the window, Mandy easily pulled the car out of the parking space and onto the main road that led out of town. Again she was amazed. You couldn't drive anywhere in LA without getting bogged down in traffic either. Pigeon Hollow, the quintessential small town, was proving to be a nice change in many ways. Including the hot cowboys who hung around in the diner.

On Main Street—yes, that was the actual name—an antique-looking spinning red, white and blue pole announced the local barbershop. A little farther down, Mandy spotted a salon. If she did get stuck here for any length of time, at least she could get her nails done.

On the outskirts of town, she saw a typical small-town honky-tonk bar, neon beer signs and all. Right next door, conveniently located for both drunks and lovers, was the Hideaway Motel. She supposed if she decided to stay, this would be her only option for lodging. That was a bit frightening. Judging by the looks of it, the Beverly Hills Hotel it wasn't. Oh, well. If it was really horrible, she could just get drunk next door and then pass out, oblivious to any horrors the room may hold.

Pushing that thought out of her mind, she concentrated on remembering the directions to the horse farm and prepared herself for what she might find there. Hopefully the owner would at least have those all-important front teeth and be able to speak coherent English. If not, she'd deal with that somehow too.

Remembering the joke Mac had made back at the diner, Mandy smiled. She was in the market for a stud. The question was would luck be on her side and provide one for her in the guise of a horseman from Gordon Equine? Her career in television might depend upon it.

Jared sped his truck up the magnolia-lined driveway of his family's farm and skidded to a stop in the gravel. He flew out the door and ran for the barns.

Breathless, he reached the open door and saw his two hired hands inside. "There's a cute blonde in a suit on her way here. Don't tell her who I am. Got it?"

Raul and Mick both looked at him as if he were crazy but nodded.

Jared nodded in response and went back outside to decide where to wait for the nameless over-caffeinated walking wet dream.

He'd settled himself in what he thought of as a casual pose, leaning back against the corral fence with one boot hooked on the bottom rail. He pulled the brim of his hat just a tad lower over his eyes and crossed his arms over his chest just as her car pulled slowly up the drive. She parked by the house and got out still wearing the suit jacket in spite of the heat.

As she perused the farm from behind a large pair of dark sunglasses he knew the exact moment she spotted him, sunglasses or not. She was perfectly still for a second, and then made her way toward him, maneuvering the high heels gingerly through the gravel. She looked so out of place he couldn't help but smile. What in the world was she doing here in Pigeon Hollow and, more importantly, at his farm?

As she laid one hand on the top rail of the fence, he watched her fingers drum away against the wood. This woman was a constant ball of motion.

"So, if you were coming here anyway, why didn't you just let me follow you? Or *weren't* you coming here anyway?" Slipping her glasses on to the top of her head, she looked up to talk to him. She was a good head shorter than his own six feet, even with her heels.

"Are you accusing me of following you, little lady?" He smirked.

Arms crossed, she cocked her head to one side. "Yes, I think I am."

A woman with an attitude. He liked that. Jared smiled broader. "Well don't get yourself all in a tizzy. I work here."

"Why didn't you say that back at the diner?" Judging by the look on her face, she definitely wasn't happy with him.

"What fun would that be?" Jared shrugged.

She let out a short but not-quite-amused laugh. "Maybe you should get cable TV. You wouldn't have to work so hard to entertain yourself."

The babe in front of him was looking mighty warm in that jacket. He started to sweat in sympathy. She blew out a breath and ran a hand along the back of her neck and under her shoulder-length hair. Then she took the jacket off.

*That* was enough to make a man stand up and take notice. Now she looked downright hot, enough to make Jared sweat for real and not from the air temperature.

Under that jacket, she was wearing nothing but a tight, low-cut, sleeveless top. Much better than the jacket, he decided, forcing his eyes up from her breasts and back to her face.

“We’ve got satellite television with all the channels, but I can tell you that a pretty stranger is much more entertaining.” He treated her to his most charming smile but it didn’t seem to work like it usually did on most women.

“I need to speak with the owner. Do you think you could stop whatever you are doing—” she looked around pointedly as if to let him know she didn’t think he was doing much of anything before she continued, “—and go and get her for me?”

What she’d said captured Jared’s attention even more than her sexy tank top had. He raised a brow. “Her? What makes you think the owner is a she?”

She let out an annoyed sounding sigh. “I do my research. I know this farm is registered with the small business bureau as being a woman-owned business.”

The question of why she was researching them remained unanswered. He was about to interrogate her further when the woman owner in question, his mama, stuck her head out of the kitchen door.

“Jared, honey. The computer crashed again. When you come in for lunch maybe you can figure out why that keeps happening.”

The pretty stranger glanced from his mother standing in the door of the house and then back to Jared. The look she shot him was full of suggestion. “Is that the owner?”

“Yup.” He started walking toward the kitchen, resigned to the fact that this nosy but hot female was bound to follow.

As anticipated, she practically jogged to keep up with him. “Are you and she...ah, you know? A couple?”

He stopped dead and turned in horror. “No.”

She shrugged. “It’s okay if you are, I’m just wondering.”

Jared shot her another unhappy glance and then scowled all the way to the back door at her lewd suggestion.

Okay, maybe if he took a moment to re-evaluate his mother the way a stranger might see her he wasn’t so shocked. Mama had been really, really young when she got married and started having babies. She’d just turned fifty, but she took good care of herself.

Dressed in cut-off jeans and flip-flops the way she was today, she looked easily in her early forties. Jared was in his late twenties. He knew there were some actresses in Hollywood who dated guys as much as twenty years younger, but still, this was his *mother*.

Jared shook his head. This woman came from a totally different world than he did. A world he could barely comprehend. Given that, he'd have to try not to judge her too harshly, particularly since he had kept his real identity from her. He also resolved to find out her damn name so he could stop thinking of her as this woman because he had a feeling he'd be thinking a lot about her.

Holding the screen door open for her, Jared waited for her to walk through first. Hell, he had been raised right. He knew how to act around a lady, even if she was likely some sort of salesman, uh, *salesperson*. He would have introduced her to his mama too, but again he didn't know the woman's name. Luckily, she was one of those assertive business-like types and stepped right up without waiting for him. "Ms. Lois Gordon?"

His mama nodded.

"I'm Mandy Morris." She smiled and stuck out her hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

"The pleasure is all mine. Jared never brings his girls home to meet me." His mama smiled wide and shook her hand.

Mandy—cute name—glanced at him briefly and then turned back to his mother. "I'm sorry, Ms. Gordon. I think you've gotten the wrong impression. I'm not one of Jared's *girls*. I'm actually here to see you. I have a business proposition for you. If you have some time now, I'd love to discuss it with you privately."

Jared noticed she said the last word very pointedly, as if to let him know he was not welcome to participate in the discussion about whatever this business proposal was. He looked her over again, all decked in her city clothes. No way was she here to make an offer to buy the farm, or even a horse. She was probably trying to sell them ad space in the local yellow pages or something.

"Ms. Morris, I may be the owner on record for Gordon Equine, but my son runs the farm. All I do nowadays is handle the paperwork and the accounting and crash the computer." Mama smiled and indicated the computer, phone and stack of papers on a desk set up in the corner of the kitchen.

She insisted on working in the kitchen rather than making one of the many other rooms into an office. Mama said it was because she usually was cooking or baking something at the same time she was working on the books. Multi-tasking, isn't that what women called it?

Personally Jared preferred doing one thing at a time. Though glancing at Mandy again, he decided he could definitely get into doing some multi-tasking when it came to her.

"Your son?" Mandy looked understandably surprised at what Mama had just revealed. She also didn't appear happy. She shot him quite a nasty look.

Now he was in for it, for withholding that apparently important information.

“Uh-huh. Jared’s my youngest.” Mama smiled at him.

“Your youngest?” Again Mandy looked surprised.

Mama nodded. “Yup. I have two older boys.”

The mysterious Mandy shook her head. “I’m sorry. You just look too young to have older children.”

Mama laughed. “Darlin’, all a woman needs in life is good face cream and a proper bra, but thank you anyway. I have to tell you though, flattery won’t get me to buy whatever you’re selling, Ms. Morris.”

“I’m not trying to flatter you, Ms. Gordon, and I’m not selling anything. I’m a television producer from California. I’ve been on the road for two weeks, visiting potential towns for a new reality series about small towns in America. If you agree, I think my search is over. I want you, Ms. Gordon, and your son, Jared, and even Mac, the cook from the diner.” She swept her arm wide. “I want it all. The honky tonk, the barbershop, even the Hideaway Motel. I love this entire town. With your help, we’ll have a smash hit on our hands, as big as *Survivor* or *American Idol*. We’ll put Pigeon Hollow on the map.”

As Mandy got more and more animated, obviously excited with her little television show idea, Jared stood quiet for her entire crazy revelation. He finally dragged his focus away from Mandy and glanced at Mama. Still silent, she met his gaze uncertainly.

“Let me explain a bit about how it will work. I’ll have a few camera crews around town concentrating on the key characters in town as well as the hotspots. Of course, I’d have a camera crew dedicated to Jared and you here at the farm. One in the diner too. That seems like a hot spot, and Mac is a great character. I don’t think we’ll need the crews here filming while you’re both sleeping, but the camera will be rolling every moment you’re awake.”

*Every moment he was awake?* Jared had heard enough. He stepped forward. “Ms. Morris—”

“Please, call me Mandy,” she interrupted with a smile.

He wondered if she’d be so sweet when they said no to this insanity.

“Mandy, I’d like to discuss this alone with my mother. If you don’t mind, maybe you could wait in the living room?” He placed his hand on her elbow.

She nodded, but looked confused, like she couldn’t imagine they wouldn’t jump at this opportunity.

When he finally had Mandy settled in the other room with the glass of iced tea Mama had insisted she take, he joined his mother back in the kitchen.

“Mama. This is crazy. I don’t want cameras all over the farm. Have you ever seen any of those reality shows? They cut and edit the tapes to make folks look however the producers want them to look.”

“You know I don’t watch that stuff, honey. But don’t you think it would be good advertising for the farm?”

“Advertising? For God’s sake, Mama. Who the hell in the audience of this crap show is going to be in the market to buy a champion-bred horse?”

“Jared Gordon, you watch your mouth. We may be partners in this business, but I am still your mother. You don’t use that kind of language or that tone in my house.” Mama’s hands landed on her hips.

Jared hung his head and took a deep calming breath. “I’m sorry. This all took me by surprise. I thought she was selling something. I never imagined this.”

“Jared, darlin’.” His mama laid a hand on his arm. “You run the farm, and you’ll be the one most affected if we do this. If you say no, then it’s no. That’s fine by me.”

He studied her closely, trying to evaluate if that was what she was really feeling. “You sure?”

“I’m sure. The decision is up to you, but *you* can be the one to tell her.” Mama smiled like the devil and walked back to the computer. She glanced back at him over her shoulder. “Let me know how it goes.”

Jared groaned and headed for the living room. He had a feeling Mandy wasn’t the type to take rejection very well.

Mandy placed her iced tea on the coaster and glanced absently around the living room, planning camera shots in her mind.

The room looked like it was probably used a few times a year for company, or when the family needed to stash away a television producer while they discussed her.

It was a nice enough space, but there was no heart in it. The kitchen was the heart of this home. She could tell that the moment she walked in. A freshly baked pie sat on the counter. The centerpiece of the kitchen, the charming, worn wooden table, looked as if it had been there for generations. Mandy could picture Lois, the lady of the house, running the family business from the computer in the corner while her pies baked in the big old oven.

She smiled, remembering Lois’ philosophy on aging well. *Good face cream and a proper bra.* Part homemaker, part corporate mogul, Lois Gordon was a down-to-earth, likeable version of Martha Stewart. An attractive woman with a sense of humor to boot, not to mention one sizzling hot, ratings-grabbing son.

They’d have to shoot Jared in his blue jeans and cowboy boots, perhaps sweaty and shirtless. He’d look meltingly handsome on tape. A solid block of muscular manliness. The golden highlights in his brown hair glinting in the sun. His hazel eyes smoldering at the camera. What viewer wouldn’t love the man and his horses?

Mandy could almost feel the weight of the Emmy award in her hand.

*And the award for best prime-time reality series goes to—*

Her reverie was interrupted as she watched Jared stroll into the living room. He lowered himself onto the couch opposite her chair. Settling on the edge of the cushion, he rested his muscular forearms on his knees as he leaned forward toward her. “Ms. Morris—”

“Mandy.” She sent him her most devastating smile. The one that closed more deals with networks and wooed waiters into giving her a table when there were none.



He nodded once. “Mandy. We’re gonna have to take a pass on your offer.”

“Excuse me?” Had she heard him correctly?

He shrugged. “It’s just not for us. I’m sorry.”

“I don’t know why you would want to pass up this opportunity. Perhaps you and your mother don’t understand what I’m offering—” She shook her head in disbelief.

“We do, but the answer is still no.” Gone was the flirting cowboy. There was no more playful joking in his soft, even tone. He was really and truly turning her down.

Mandy wasn’t used to anyone actually saying no to her. Particularly not men. She was possibly for the first time ever, speechless.

Jared laughed. “You look shocked.”

“Honestly, I am.”

“I’m sure you’ll find another town that you love just as much as Pigeon Hollow. Small towns like this are a dime a dozen in the South.”

The town maybe, but not a woman-owned horse farm, and a handsome horseman with a voice like silk to go with it. No, she wasn’t willing to let it all go that easily. Mandy dug a business card out of the pocket of the suit jacket folded in her lap.

She stood and handed the card to him. “I’m not giving up, Mr. Gordon. I have one other town to see just south of here and then I’m coming back. I hope you’ll have reconsidered and have a different answer for me when I do.”

He treated her to a gorgeous crooked smile. “I’m not gonna say that I wouldn’t be happy to see you again, but my answer’s not gonna change.”

Mandy felt her heart quicken just a bit. He was back to flirting again. Maybe his answer wasn’t so definite. She was not at all opposed to a bit of flirtation with a handsome man, particularly if it got her a signed consent form and a hit show in the end. She might actually enjoy a bit of innocent gentlemanly male attention. It would be a nice change from the lecherous men in LA.

She caught his eye. “I respect your decision, but I’d still like to stop by on my way back through. If that’s all right.”

Jared studied her closely before he nodded. “Sure.”

“Thank you.” Mandy turned and felt his eyes on her back as she walked out the door. She smiled. She wasn’t defeated yet.

## Chapter Three

Two days later, Mandy drove down Main Street in Pigeon Hollow and fell in love with it all over again. The other town she'd gone to visit had been a bust. She was still without a town for her show.

No town was going to live up to this one since she had set her sights on it. She had to convince the Gordons. She had to change Jared's mind somehow.

Mandy slowed as she neared the diner and spotted a white pickup truck with *Gordon Equine* painted on the door. Luck was on her side today. Hoping her good fortune would continue with the Gordons, she swung into an open parking spot.

Before getting out, she pulled her jacket off and smoothed the skirt of her short, sleeveless sundress. Keeping Lois Gordon's advice in mind, she hiked her boobs a bit higher inside her bra and was happy with the resulting cleavage. A bit more lipstick and she was good to go.

She walked into the diner and got a blast full of welcome air-conditioned cold air in the face. Raising her sunglasses up and setting them on top of her head, she glanced around the diner. There were plenty of people inside but Jared Gordon wasn't one of them. Maybe he was in the restroom?

A cup of seventy-five-cent coffee at the counter would give her time to wait for him without looking suspicious, and she could get a look at some of the other local characters while she was at it.

Slipping onto one of the high counter stools, she ordered the coffee and then turned her attention to the dark-haired man in the khaki uniform next to her. A small town sheriff, a tin star on his chest and all, and he was cute too. She had to tape the show in this town. It was too perfect. She couldn't have made it any better if she'd cast it herself.

Just to prove her already lofty opinion of the town's characters and their marketability, Mac spotted her from his place inside the kitchen.

"Hey there, pretty lady. You come back for your stud?" A gravelly bark of a laugh followed Mac's question as he amused himself.

She laughed and decided to play along with the joke. If she was going to flirt her way into a contract, she might as well start now. "Actually, I did, but even though I saw his truck outside he doesn't seem to be in here."

At her response, Mac's laughter filled the kitchen again, spilling out into the diner and making a few of patrons inside look up.

Even the hunky sheriff turned his ice blue eyes to her. "You talking about the Gordon truck outside?"

She nodded. "I was looking for Jared Gordon."

He raised an inquisitive brow at that. "Were you now?"

"Uh-huh. Know him?" She was getting good at this southern speak. Short, sweet and to the point.

"I might."

She smiled. "Either you do or you don't."

He watched her closely. "You're not from around here."

It wasn't a question, but she answered it anyway. "No, I'm not."

"What you want with him?" This sexy guy practically smoldered with brooding good looks. She'd have to put a camera team on him too.

Mandy let out a short laugh. "You southerners sure are a suspicious bunch. I thought you were supposed to be famous for your hospitality. You know, the kindness of strangers and all that."

He cocked a brow in her direction. "We also watch out for our own."

She'd give anything to have a video crew with her right now. It was just too perfect. *We watch out for our own, stranger.* She wouldn't have been at all surprised if John Wayne swaggered through the door and spit some tobacco on the floor. Well, maybe a little surprised, since he was dead, but the entire town had the feel of a place out of its time.

"You got much crime around here, Sheriff?" Mandy had to know more. She couldn't help herself.

They could put a camera in the car with him all during his shift. It would be amazing. Although, if she thought Jared was going to be a tough sell, this guy would probably be worse by the looks of him. He hadn't even cracked a smile. Forget about flirting with him, she'd probably get locked up in the town jail for solicitation or something.

"Deputy." His single word, delivered in a deeper than average voice, interrupted her thoughts.

"Excuse me?" Mandy dragged her spinning mind from visions of the sheriff character on screen back to the man seated right in front of her.

"I'm a deputy, not the sheriff." He stared at her over the rim of the coffee mug held in his hand.

"*The* sheriff. You mean there's only one?" She flashed back to sheriff Andy Griffith and his deputy Barney Fife in small town Mayberry back in the black-and-white days of TV during the sixties.

He frowned at her as if he thought she was an imbecile. "'Course there's only one."

"Of course. Sorry."

Still looking suspiciously at her, he set his mug down on the counter. After throwing a few dollars down next to it, he inclined his head to her in a kind of goodbye gesture that managed not to have one bit of warmth in it. He strode his booted feet right out of the diner and she regretfully watched him go. If she didn't get to tape the show in this town, she'd never forgive herself.

"You lookin' for Jared Gordon?"

Apparently the fun wasn't over just yet. Just as "I'm a deputy" left, the waitress came over.

Mandy looked the chubby young woman up and down. Her nametag read *Misty*. How sweet. “Yes, Misty, I am.”

“You, uh, *dating* him?”

She’d used the word dating like it was a euphemism for something else, a word that wasn’t quite so nice and would get you an FCC fine if you used it on network TV. Well, well, well. Was this jealousy she saw before her? The plot thickened.

Mandy answered Misty’s question with one of her own. “Are you?”

The brunette shook her head, sending the ponytail held back with the unfashionably large hair accessory flying from side to side. “Nope, but my friend is. She wouldn’t take kindly to no woman snooping ’round her man.”

Hmmm. What was this? A warning? A threat? More importantly, why the hell was Mandy experiencing something that felt suspiciously like jealousy over the news that Jared had a girlfriend? She supposed it spoke to how serious the relationship was, or wasn’t, since he’d never brought whomever this girl was home to meet his mother judging by what Lois had said.

An existing love interest for Jared in the show. Mandy’d have to think about how to work that angle. Meanwhile, she had Misty to deal with. “I’m not snooping. I have business with Gordon Equine.”

“What kind of business? You ain’t looking like no horsewoman to me.”

Mandy had had about enough of the waitress and her grammatically incorrect interrogation. “*Private* business. Thanks for the coffee.”

She dug a dollar bill out of her purse and slipped it beneath the coffee cup.

Mandy stood and called a goodbye to Mac in the back. With Misty still shooting daggers at her, she was out the door. Perhaps she was enjoying the fact she’d left the waitress suspicious as to her intentions toward Jared a bit too much. Good, it would serve the girl right for being so nosy.

Still not knowing why there was a Gordon truck parked outside and no Gordon inside, Mandy decided to head over to the farm. If she couldn’t find Jared, she could at least talk to his mother. Maybe woman to woman they could work out a deal. She had to have at least one Gordon on her side and get them to sign the consent form. This town was too intertwined to film here if she didn’t have all of the main characters on board. As far as Mandy was concerned, the Gordons struck her as the town headliners.

The trip to the Gordon’s house didn’t fail to impress her, even the second time. She drove beneath the trees lining the winding gravel road that led to a beautiful white farmhouse complete with porch and rocking chairs. It was all too perfect and it would photograph beautifully.

Mandy breathed in the scent of jasmine as she pulled herself out of the rental car and into the warm air. Ignoring the front door, she followed the path to the back door where she’d entered two days ago.

She saw Lois Gordon right where she expected her, in the kitchen. Mandy knocked on the screen door just as Lois was pulling a pie out of the oven and looking younger than ever in capri jeans and a button-down shirt tied at the waist.

Hands still covered in oven mitts, Lois turned toward the door with a smile. "Hey there, darlin'. Come on in."

Mandy swung the screen door open and it squeaked charmingly. Even the noises around the farm added to her love of the place. "Thank you, Mrs. Gordon."

"Lois."

"Lois, then." Mandy nodded. "Do you bake a pie every day?"

Lois pulled off her oven mitts. "Pretty much. Jared and the boys who work for us enjoy it, but this particular pie is for my book-club meeting tonight. Sorry I can't offer you a piece. I've got some fresh lemonade made though."

Mandy held up a hand. "That's fine. Thank you anyway."

"What can I do for you, darlin'?"

"I was just wondering if you'd thought any more about the show. I really think you'd be great."

Lois sat down and patted the seat of the chair next to her. Mandy lowered herself into it.

"Darlin', that decision isn't mine to make. It's Jared's. More than half the responsibility of working this farm is already his, but all of it will be when I'm gone. I have to respect his decision."

Mandy smiled. "I don't think you're going anywhere for a long time."

"From your mouth to God's ears, but nobody knows what's in store for them."

She had to have this woman, this town, on her show. Mandy hadn't wanted anything this much in a long time. Frustrated and running out of ideas, Mandy idly ran one finger over a small crack in the old table. She could picture Lois and Jared seated here, eating pie. "I truly don't understand why your son is so set against it."

"He can be stubborn, I can tell you that." Lois let out a short laugh. "It's a Gordon trait, I'm afraid. In any case, you'll have to talk to him yourself."

Mandy pursed her lips. "I was planning on it. I saw a Gordon Equine truck parked outside the diner, but I didn't see Jared there."

Lois shook her head. "The boys took the truck to run some errands in town. Jared's here. He's out back behind the barn unloading the hay truck."

Mandy sat up straighter in her chair. "Really? He's here now?"

"Really." Lois nodded. "You can go on back and see him if you want."

"I think I will. Thank you." Newly inspired, Mandy jumped up from the chair.

"I'll be seeing you, Mandy."

Mandy paused in the kitchen doorway. "I hope so, but if Jared doesn't agree, I'll be leaving for LA tomorrow."

A slow, knowing smile crossed Lois's lips. "I think I'll be seeing more of you."

The entire trip to the barn, Mandy wondered how Lois could be so sure of that.

Standing on a mountain of tightly stacked hay bales, Jared flung another two from his perch atop the trailer. They flew through the small door in the wall of the barn.

He pulled his shirt off and wiped the sweat from his face with it. If he had known the guy he bought hay from was going to drop the truck off today, he would never have let Raul and Mick both go into town to pick up horse feed. Since it was lunchtime, they'd probably stopped at the diner too, so he didn't expect them back for a while.

Jared huffed out a breath. He'd get the hay off the truck and into the barn by himself, but they could have the pleasure of stacking the two-hundred-plus bales inside the hay room when they got back. That thought helped a bit, but not much. He adjusted his gloves, grabbed the string of two more bales, one in each hand, and heaved them through the door.

"Hey, Casanova!"

Jared smiled when he heard Bobby's voice from below. "Bobby. Perfect timing. You're just in time to help."

"Are you crazy? I joined the department so I wouldn't have to be a farmer. Too much damn work."

"You're telling me." Jared paused in his work and walked to the edge of the stacked bales so he could better talk to his friend. "Why are you calling me Casanova?"

Bobby shielded his face from the sun with his forearm as he looked up at Jared. "You know of any reason why a cute blonde in expensive-looking city clothes would be asking about you at the diner?"

Jared broke out in a grin. "She was? Hot damn."

"So you do know her. I should've figured that." Bobby shook his head.

"Hell yeah, I know her." Not near well enough. He'd definitely like to get to know her better.

"All right, that's all I needed to know. I'll be on my way then before you figure out a way to make me help."

Jared laughed. "That's okay. With the news you just brought, I'll give you a reprieve from helping this one time."

Bobby raised a brow, considering. "I think I might rather hear what happens when she finally finds you."

"Well, that's gonna cost you because hopefully it's gonna to be one hell of a story. At least a full hay truck worth of help, maybe two."

Bobby laughed. "I'll have to think about that. I'm still on duty. I'll see you tonight at the bar."

“Yes, you will.” Unless he was otherwise occupied with his city girl.

Resisting the urge to drive into town right then, Jared sincerely hoped Mandy did find him and soon. Hopefully, he’d have something worthwhile to tell Bobby about when he met him later tonight. At least for now he had something good to occupy his mind while he finished unloading the truck. He grabbed another two bales and hefted them into the barn.

Turning to reposition himself, he saw a sight that was even better than his imagination. The pretty little thing herself was walking toward him as if she was tiptoeing through a minefield.

“I’ll have to remember not to wear my best shoes when I come here.” She shaded her eyes with her hand as she looked up at him.

“It sounds like you plan on coming here often.” He grinned. That was fine by him.

“You agree to do the show and I’ll be seeing you every day for eight weeks.”

Hmm. Tempting and disappointing at the same time. “Darlin’, if that’s the only reason you’re here, I’m afraid you wasted your time.” Of course that was it. She wanted to see him about the damn show. Too bad. He’d hoped she was interested in more than just that.

She smiled up at him sweetly. “Can’t blame a girl for trying, but no. That’s not the only reason I’m here.”

Now they were getting somewhere. He dropped down to the ground next to her and leaned against the bed of the trailer. He watched her eyes drop to his bare chest before she finally raised them back to his face. Very interesting.

“Why are you here then?” he asked.

Mandy laughed, her brilliantly white teeth as dazzling as the rest of her. “I’m not really sure anymore. On my way over here to see you, I met a friend of your girlfriend’s at the diner. She pretty much told me to stay away from you.”

“I don’t have a girlfriend in town.” That just figured. One indiscretion—all right, three months worth of indiscretions—with Sue Ann and she was going to try to ruin his life forever.

“You sure about that, Jared?” She raised one perfect brow.

“Very sure.” Jared’s blood pressure shot sky high.

“The waitress thinks you do.” Mandy pursed her tempting heart-shaped lips but Jared could barely enjoy looking at them in his anger.

Damn Misty, butting her nose in his business. Jared scowled. “The waitress is wrong.”

Mandy watched him closely for a moment. “I’ve got a room at the Hideaway, heaven help me.” She rolled her eyes. “I’ll be staying there until I leave for LA tomorrow.”

Jared had just been enjoying her very low opinion of their local motel, not that he blamed her, when she dropped the bomb about LA. He frowned. “You’re leaving tomorrow?”

“Yes, I don’t have a reason to stay. Unless you give me one.” She waited expectantly.

He drew in a deep breath. "I can't agree to that show."

"Understood." She turned to go.

He put a hand on her elbow to stop her. "Wait. That's it?"

She turned back. "That's all I've got to say. Do you have anything more to say?"

This girl wasn't going to make it easy on him, was she? First she tells him where she's staying, and then she leaves? Talk about mixed signals. Things were just too damn confusing when women were in charge of them. He'd have to take control and get them back on track.

"I'm gonna be at the bar right next to the Hideaway tonight. I'm meeting a friend there."

"A friend?" She raised a brow.

He laughed. As if he would invite her to come if he was meeting a girl there. "A guy friend. Why don't you walk over and join us there?"

"Why? Are you willing to talk more about the show?"

"Nope. But what else have you got to do? Oh, wait, I think the Hideaway might have free cable. Yeah, you probably will want to stay in tonight." He watched the emotions dance across her face. She was definitely tempted. She was also stubborn as all hell.

Finally, she let out a huff. "What time?"

"Around eight." Jared couldn't suppress his smile. She turned to go without a word, but he wasn't done yet. "See you there."

"Maybe, if I'm not too busy." She didn't even turn around to answer him, but just kept walking. That was fine. He enjoyed watching her ass move beneath her dress.

Jared shook his head at himself. He was obviously insane. She was definitely one high-maintenance chick. She was going to make him work hard for it, if *it* ever ended up happening. Why did that realization make her seem even more appealing?

He climbed back up onto the hay truck with a whole lot more to think about now.



## Chapter Four

A squirrel ran in front of Mandy's car and she slammed on the brakes. The car screeched to a stop, but her heart didn't slow quite as readily. It kept pumping away as she tried to calm herself.

"Stupid squirrel." It was easier to blame the animal than herself.

The fact was she'd been driving back into town without paying any attention to the road ahead of her. She couldn't get the vision of a certain cowboy out of her head. The vision of Jared, half-naked and throwing hay bales two at a time like they weighed nothing, was enough to get a woman's juices flowing. So was his invitation. Oh yeah, he'd left no doubt. Tonight was not to talk about the show. Tonight was about him and her.

She'd see about that. He didn't have a girlfriend. Or at least that's what he'd said. She tended to believe him more than Misty, the local gossip at the diner. Though she had a feeling there was definitely a story there. She'd get to the bottom of it somehow. Jealous exes and pissed-off women made for great television.

In any event, if she had to woo the man to get the show, so be it. Envisioning the slick sheen of sweat accentuating all of the many ripples of his muscles, she had to admit seducing the man would be a pleasure on her part, show or no show. Getting him for the show would be a really nice fringe benefit.

Of course she was going to be at that bar tonight, regardless of what she'd said to him before she left. She'd only been pretending she was merely considering it. Hell or high water wouldn't keep her away. If she couldn't convince a small-town guy who was already attracted to her to sign the consent form for the show while under the influence of alcohol, then she had better hang up her producer hat. Really, if she couldn't handle the folks here in Pigeon Hollow, forget about the sharks in LA.

Mandy spotted a small store on the corner of Main Street. She could do some errands while she was in town. It wouldn't hurt to soak up some more of the local culture and make more notes. Maybe she'd even stop by and get her nails done for her date with Jared.

Date. Even just the word brought a smile to her face.

When Mandy had finally killed all the time she could in town, she headed back to the motel. The Hideaway loomed before the hood of the rental car as she pulled up to her room door.

In spite of her low expectations, it really wasn't that bad. She'd been pleasantly surprised upon check in. There was no visible grime or bugs. The furnishings in the good-sized space, though worn and

unfashionable, were at least neat and clean. The housekeeping was decent, so she wouldn't have to wear rubber shoes to shower in or anything like that. There was even a hookup for her laptop.

Imagine that, Pigeon Hollow, keeping up with the age of the Internet. And there were enough rooms at the Hideaway that if some of the crew doubled up, they could all stay there together during taping.

Happily making further plans for the crew as she stepped out of the shower, she began to rifle through her suitcase. Were two hundred dollar rhinestone-studded designer jeans too much for the honky tonk next door? They had to be more appropriate than one of her suits and that was what her choices amounted to at the moment. She pulled out a tank top and heels and she was good to go.

Unfortunately, she was still too early. She had no intention of getting there before Jared arrived, so she booted up the laptop and checked her emails. Meanwhile, as she kept checking the time in the corner of the laptop screen, Mandy told herself she was anxious to get to the bar to start working on Jared about the show. It definitely wasn't that she was excited to see him personally.

Time moved more slowly than ever before simply because she was waiting to be able to leave. She didn't want to arrive before Jared and his friend.

The urge to take a nap was strong. Last night's hotel had been so bad it made the Hideaway look like the Ritz Carlton. She'd slept like crap and was paying for it now. She didn't dare lie down though for fear she'd sleep right through the night. Instead, Mandy made notes, returned phone calls, checked if she had enough blank consent forms for all the main characters in town.

Finally it was just after eight. She flipped the lid of the laptop shut.

Perfect. She'd be fashionably late. Mandy checked her makeup one last time in the wall mirror and tried not to wonder what this mysterious non-girlfriend of Jared's looked like. While she was at it, she adjusted the tank top to show just a bit more cleavage.

After shoving cash and her room key into her pocket, Mandy was good to go. She walked across the hotel's parking lot toward the bar, cursing the deep, sharp gravel ruining the heels of her shoes with every step.

Mandy anticipated this bar would probably play a major role when it came time for taping. Drunks in a bar made for great television. She heard the jukebox pumping out a lively country tune before she even opened the door.

Once inside, she knew she was right about the bar being perfect for the show. It simply oozed small-town atmosphere. Right down to the fact the entire place quieted and every patron inside turned to look at her when she opened the door and stepped inside. She nearly laughed at the locals' stereotypical reaction to her.

Jared and none other than the deputy sat at a table just off the dance floor. Jared stood when she entered. A country gentleman. She smiled at that idea and made her way to them.

“Hey there, darlin’. Wow, you look great. I gotta say, I didn’t think you actually owned a pair of jeans.” Jared glanced down at her approvingly.

“Of course I do. I’m not always dressed in stuffy business suits.”

He was looking pretty great himself even though he was now wearing a shirt. She had liked the view that afternoon without it so much better.

“Good to know.” He grinned at her. “Mandy, this here is my friend, Bobby Barton. Bobby, this is Miss Mandy Morris from Los Angeles.”

She was sure that Jared had already filled his friend in about exactly who and what she was, but that was fine. She made no pretense about why she was in town.

Mandy extended her hand. “We’ve already met, sort of. Nice to see you again, Deputy.”

He shook her hand with a stern nod. “Bobby is fine. I’m off duty tonight, Ms. Morris.”

She shook her head. “Nuh-uh. It’s Mandy. No business suits, no formal talk. Tonight is for fun only.”

Jared grinned wider, resting his hand lightly at the small of her back. “That’s good to hear too. What can I get you to drink?”

Supposing the bartender would be incapable of mixing up a good Cosmopolitan and that them pouring a decent wine was even more questionable, Mandy settled on something safe. “A light beer, please?”

“You got it, darlin’.” Jared grinned and headed for the bar.

Mandy had been looking forward to picking the deputy’s brain for a minute or two before the horseman returned. Unfortunately, Jared somehow procured the beer, and two more for himself and Bobby, faster than it took her to get seated and break the ice with the stone-faced lawman. To be fair, she’d bought the jeans to fit a bit tightly. It made settling into one of the three chairs tightly crowded around the tiny cocktail table a tough squeeze.

When she was seated, if less than comfortably, and Jared had returned all three of them crowded cozily around the table so small her knee kept bumping into Jared’s leg. He didn’t move out of the way, and neither did she. The second time it happened within about a minute, Mandy glanced his way. She found him grinning at her. Jared Gordon was definitely into games.

Fine. Two could play at this. She hadn’t bumped knees with a guy in awhile. She hadn’t bumped anything else with a guy in a while either, come to think of it. She was long overdue for that. For now, this would do.

Mandy adjusted her position beneath the table. Crossing her legs she aligned herself so she could slowly and tantalizingly run her toe up and down Jared’s calf.

His raised brow and wide smile that he tried to hide behind his beer as he took a long draw from the bottle told Mandy her little flirtation was affecting him. Damn, it was starting to get to her too as her insides began to warm.

Reminding herself she was here to get her release signed and not get laid, Mandy started making small talk that would hopefully lead to a discussion about her show. Maybe their little game beneath the table would loosen Jared up enough he'd reconsider. "This is a great place. No wonder you come here."

Sipping on the longneck bottle—she had refused the glass so she'd blend in with the locals—Mandy felt the cold foam slip down her throat. With every swallow she thought more about what it would be like to take this thing with Jared to another level.

Jared laughed. "It's also the only place. That's why we come here."

Bobby didn't even smile. It seemed Bobby was going to be the tougher nut to crack, more so even than Jared. That was all right. She was up for a challenge. She was just getting her beer muscles...and toes. Adjusting her angle, she moved the game of footsie to Jared's thigh.

"Well, I've been to more small towns and their bars in the last two weeks than I ever imagined I'd see in a lifetime. Having a basis for comparison, I can assure you this is one of the better ones."

"Tell me where you've been, darlin'. What've you been doin' since I saw you last?" Jared's hand landed on her knee and squeezed and she had to work to smother a moan.

Why was she wishing he'd slide his hand up a little farther? The seam of her jeans was already pressing against a suddenly incredibly sensitive spot. If Jared even touched her there she'd come right at the table beneath the steely-eyed perusal of the local law enforcement. There was probably some sort of law against public orgasms in Pigeon Hollow. She nearly giggled at that and realized she was well on her way to getting tipsy. Mandy remembered she'd forgotten to eat dinner.

With a knowing grin that said he knew exactly what his touch has done to her, Jared relaxed back in his chair and stretched out one booted leg. She glanced at the long, lean, denim-clad leg and swallowed.

He wanted stories? She had stories. And what better way to take her mind off of how that leg would feel if she dared to put her hand on it? Mandy swallowed the desire in her throat and launched into the first of what would turn into many tales of her recent travels.

Before she knew it, the waitress had dropped off another round. The second beer went down as easily and quickly as the first while she was regaling them with stories of all the characters she'd met over the last few weeks of roaming the South in her rental car.

Still laughing from one of her descriptions, Jared put down his bottle and stood. "If you'll 'scuse me."

She nodded as he disappeared into dark a corner in the back of the bar, leaving her alone with Bobby.

The deputy leaned forward once Jared was gone. "What are you still doing in my town, Miss Mandy?"

Leaning forward herself, she answered him. "Honestly? I'm here to convince your town that my offer to tape my show here is the best thing that ever happened to them."

"You many think that, but I'm not so sure."

“Forgive me, but if you don’t see how I can benefit every person here, then you’re as shortsighted as your friend. I’ve talked to a few of the business owners, Deputy. All of them were enthusiastic about the idea. They’d all sign on in a heartbeat. All of them except the one I need. The Gordons still say no. Jared Gordon to be exact.”

“There’s something I don’t understand.” Bobby considered her closely. “If you’re so set on Pigeon Hollow, why not just do your show and leave the Gordons out of it?”

Mandy shook her head. “Without a signed consent form, I’ll have to blur Jared out of any shots he gets his damn hunky, hot body into.” *Oh, shit.* Had she said that out loud? Maybe Bobby didn’t notice.

Bobby choked on the swallow of beer he’d just taken. Apparently he’d noticed. Might as well keep talking now that she had his complete attention.

“What Jared doesn’t understand is what I can do for this town. I stopped by today to get my nails done at Delilah’s Salon.”

“Delia’s,” Bobby corrected.

Feeling looser than she had in a year or more, Mandy waved one hand in the air. “Whatever. Anyway, it was totally dead. I was the only person in there. Now, I bring in a crew of over a dozen here for two months, think what an economic boost that’ll give to the small businesses. Every one of that crew is going to need food, drink, lodging, salon services, gasoline, supplies...”

Bobby nodded. “Yeah, and what happens once you leave and take all those people with you? Where are we then?”

Shaking her head, Mandy took another slug of her light beer, which wasn’t feeling so light as it went right to her head. “After the show hits the air, travelers who used to whiz past on the expressway may decide to stop in the quaint little town they saw on television. They’ll stop for a break and a bite at Mac’s diner before continuing on. There will be so many tourists the Hideaway won’t be able to accommodate them all. Maybe a bed and breakfast or two will open up and then the visitors will stay for the weekend. Don’t the people of Pigeon Hollow deserve that chance? And who the hell is Jared Gordon to take it away from them?”

Mandy stopped mid-rant when she noticed Bobby’s gaze settle on something just above her shoulder. With a sinking feeling she instinctively knew what he was staring at. She turned slowly in her chair. “Jared. How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough.” There was an angry set to his jaw. The same jaw she’d briefly fantasized about nibbling on. That wasn’t going to happen now.

He went from focusing his hazel eyes on her to a point somewhere up in the corner of the ceiling. It wasn’t a good sign that he wouldn’t even look at her.

Standing, she shook her head. “I didn’t say anything just now that I wouldn’t have said to your face, Jared. You want to know what I think is really bothering you? You know every damn word is true.”

*Cat Johnson*

Mandy slammed her beer bottle down on the table. After nodding to Bobby, she spared one last glance at Jared and then was out the door.

## Chapter Five

Jared sat again and grabbed his beer, refusing to even look as the bar door swung shut behind Mandy.

Bobby, however, watched her dramatic exit with an amused expression on his face. “She’s hot for you.”

“Are you fucking crazy?” Jared had nearly choked on his beer at that suggestion. “She’s only here to get her damn show made. She just made that more than obvious.”

Here Jared had been thinking Mandy was flirting with him because she liked him. How stupid could he be? Letting out a bitter laugh, he wondered exactly how far she’d been willing to take her little come-on to get him to agree to the show. He didn’t want to consider the answer to that question. He’d really liked her, proving he was a stupid man.

Bobby shook his head. “Nope. Well, yeah, she wants this show made, but she could pick another town if she really wanted to. You heard the stories she told us. There’s a ton of places more interesting than Pigeon Hollow. I think she’s so attached to this town because of you.”

“No, you’re wrong. She is single-minded and conniving and the only reason she sashayed her butt in here in those tight jeans tonight is so I’d agree to her show.” Jared was willing to bet she would have wiggled right out of those jeans too, all for her show.

“Why conniving? She never kept it a secret she wants this show done here. And she was right. She didn’t say anything that bad about you to me just now. I don’t know why you’re so pissed.”

Jared couldn’t admit he was pissed because he’d believed she was here for him, not the damn show. That’s what it had been all about. Her staring at his chest today while he was unloading the hay. The flirting, pretending she wasn’t coming to the bar. Even her getting him hard with that damn foot of hers under the table. It was all about the show. Always had been, always would be. The more he thought about it, the angrier he got.

Jared slammed his beer bottle down onto the table and stood. “I’m going over there to the Hideaway and giving her a piece of my mind.”

“You really want to do that?” Bobby raised a brow.

“Hell yeah, I do. Why?” There would be no way he’d sleep a wink tonight until he told her exactly what he felt about her and her lying city ways, and Jared Gordon did not lose sleep over any woman.

Bobby shrugged. “Just making sure you know what you’re doing. You got a condom in your pocket?”

More than one actually. That had been wishful thinking on his part when he'd left the house tonight, back when he thought Mandy was a decent person. "What the hell does that have to do with anything?"

"Just answer the question."

Jared sighed. "Yes, I do. What are you my father?"

"No, I'm not. Thank God." Bobby shook his head.

Jared frowned deeply at his friend's strange behavior. "Watch my beer, will ya? I'll be right back."

Bobby laughed. "Yeah, okay."

Was that sarcasm? He'd have to deal with Bobby later. Right now, he had other fish to fry.

Jared held on tightly to his anger until he'd made it across the parking lot. He found her rental car parked in front of the end unit. It was the only room with the lights on. It was probably the only room with an occupant.

Confident he had the correct door, he knocked loudly before he had a chance to think and change his mind. When she opened the door wearing nothing but a short slip of silk, he stopped thinking all together.

He supposed he stepped into the room, although he didn't really remember doing so. Somehow, the door was closed behind him and Mandy was standing so close, she was practically pressed against him.

Grasping for the reason he was here, he finally came up with it. "You pissed me off tonight, darlin'."

"You've pissed me off every day since I met you, Jared Gordon."

Her blue eyes blazed into his. At six feet plus a few inches more in his boots, Jared towered over Mandy, but she didn't back down, or back up, even an inch. Jared swallowed hard when his glance hit upon the hardened nipples protruding through the painfully thin silk of whatever it was she was wearing.

He tried to wrestle his eyes up. "Put something on so I can yell at you."

She snorted out a laugh. "No. You can just yell at me in what I'm wearing."

"Damn it. Why are you so stubborn?"

"Ha! You should talk."

He fisted his hands at his sides to avoid grabbing her. Whether he wanted to shake her silly or kiss her breathless, he wasn't sure. The desire was equally strong to do both. "I'm so angry at you I can't think straight."

Yet he still wanted to fuck her until she couldn't walk. That realization made him even angrier.

"You're so angry at me? That's rich." She glared at him with defiance. "You, Jared Gordon, are a stubborn, chauvinistic, backwoods—"

Mandy never finished her sentence. It was as if his body moved faster than his brain, and before Jared knew it, his mouth covered hers. Once his brain caught up, there was a small nagging instinct that this was probably a really bad idea given his current mood and the fact she was a conniving, lying, single-minded...sexy-as-all-hell city girl.



A petite fist hit him once in the chest before she reached up and grabbed his hair to pull his head closer to hers.

Her body pressed against his from chest to thigh, and still he couldn't seem to get close enough to her. He hadn't been doing too well talking himself out of kissing her anyway, so he gave up.

With two hands on her silk-covered ass, he lifted her off the ground. She wrapped gloriously bare legs around his waist and her arms around his neck. The position was a vast improvement over when they'd both been standing. Now her crotch pressed nicely against his, but he wanted to move. He wanted his hands free. He needed more of her. His hands on every inch of her skin.

Blindly, Jared carried her across the room, misjudged the distance and smashed them both into the wooden dresser. She didn't complain. Neither did he. He couldn't have said anything if he'd wanted to. He was too busy thrusting his tongue into her hot wet mouth. He imagined what it would be like to plunge inside other hot wet parts of her and his knees went weak.

With her perched on the edge of the dresser, he ground his pelvis into her. Pushing her short nightgown up to her hips, he found she wore no underwear underneath. That discovery did in what remained of any rational thought.

He couldn't catch his breath as he breathed fast and hard—he guessed it was from the combination of anger and sex. He pulled back long enough to reinforce how angry he was. "I'm still mad at you."

She glared back, her hands still gripping the fabric of his T-shirt tightly. "Good, because I'm still mad at you."

He bent his head again and shoved his tongue roughly into her mouth. She met him with her own, and matched thrust for thrust while pulling his shirt out of the waistband of his jeans.

He leaned back again and pulled the shirt over his head himself, flinging it to the floor. "If this happens, I'm warning you, I'm too angry to be gentle."

"Fine. I didn't ask you for gentle." She undid the button on his jeans and lowered the zipper. She freed his erection from his briefs with rough hands, as if to prove what she'd just said. Her hand began working him hard.

"Fine." He felt for the condom in his pocket. Finding it, he tore it open with his teeth, feeling more animal than man. She stopped stroking him so he could cover himself. Grabbing her hips, he slid her forward and plunged into her warm wetness.

Jared pounded into her, hard and rough. She was rougher, drawing her nails down his back, leaving what would probably turn into scratches. Mandy bit his shoulder. He marked her neck with his mouth in retaliation.

He didn't know how long it lasted. It could have been just a few minutes. It could have been half an hour. Finally, he teetered on the edge and exploded within her. Eyes squeezed shut, he pushed deep into her and enjoyed the final pulses of one very satisfying release.

Mandy's hands grabbed his hips and held him close within her. Her breath started to come in small gasps and he felt her start to convulse around him. He held her tighter as she came, trembling in his arms, and all of his anger dissolved right then and there.

Eyes still closed, Jared felt every pulse of her muscles. He kissed her hair and held her until the shuddering stopped. He'd been too angry and focused on his own pleasure in the beginning to even care about hers, but the moment he felt her come around him, that all changed. He enjoyed every subtle nuance. Each breath. Every tremble.

Sue Ann had been a real screamer. He'd liked it in the beginning, but it got old quick. And now, after this with Mandy, he had to wonder how much, if any of it, had been genuine with Sue Ann. This with Mandy seemed so honest. So amazing. And what's more, the woman who seemed to always be in control of herself and everything else, now clung to him like she was drowning and he was her only life preserver.

It was just one orgasm, but it felt so right, so real, so natural to be sharing it with Mandy. To be in her and feel it right along with her. His feeling of satisfaction turned into a yearning to have her again...and again.

He suddenly very badly wanted to be in the nice comfy bed with her. "Hold on to me."

She still had her arms and legs clasped around him. She showed no signs of letting go so telling her had been probably unnecessary. He lifted her and walked them both to the bed.

A bit of maneuvering and the use of a lot of leg muscles and he had lowered her gently to the bed. He even managed to get them there without tripping over his pants, which hung open and low on his hips.

Mandy finally released her hold on him. That was a bit disappointing. He liked the feeling of her clinging to him. She watched him from beneath drowsy lids as he wiggled the horrid motel comforter from beneath her and pulled it down to the end of the bed. He covered her with the sheet and blanket. Since she had the a/c on high, it was so cold in the room she was starting to get goose bumps.

Jared had managed to work up a sweat during their loving and now it sat cold on his skin, but he couldn't bring himself to pull his shirt back on just yet as he watched her in the bed. It was too tempting to strip and crawl in next to her. In fact, after he went to the bathroom and disposed of the condom, he might do just that.

"Close your eyes, darlin'. I'll be right back."

Eyes drifting sleepily shut, Mandy nodded and snuggled lower under the covers with a sexy little moan that nearly had him jumping her all over again.

Jared watched her with a smile and then slipped quietly into the bathroom to clean up. On his way there he realized there was not one ounce of anger or tension left in his body. He found it amazing how sex and a good orgasm could do that to a man.

By the time he returned, she was sound asleep. She looked so young and innocent sleeping. Without all the impatient toe-tapping and finger-drumming, she was no longer the tough-as-nails businesswoman.

He slid down into the room's only chair and considered the situation. Bobby had known something sexual was going to happen. Hence the strange condom discussion right before Jared had left the bar. So why the hell hadn't Jared known they'd end up here like this? He supposed he'd been too angry and yes, too stubborn, to see what was right in front of him.

The seat of the chair felt awful beneath him, even for hotel furniture. Wondering why he was so uncomfortable, Jared wiggled his butt in the chair and heard a crinkling. He was sitting on something. Jared pulled it out from underneath his ass and glanced at it. It was a folder of some sort. *Pigeon Hollow* was written in ladylike script across the front.

Feeling a bit guilty for being nosy, Jared opened it anyway and studied what was inside. Hand-written notes covered a page of lined paper. From what he could decipher, Mandy had taken notes on everyone in town she'd found interesting.

Skimming the page, he stopped when his own name caught his attention. What she'd written about him had his eyes opening wider. Things like *cutie who gave directions at diner, investigate further. And shoot Jared Gordon shirtless as often as possible—hottie!!!*

Even his mother had made the cut for the cast of interesting characters. Mandy referred to her as a *likeable version of Martha Stewart*. Mac, Delia, even Bobby, referenced simply as *The Deputy*, were all listed here. Jared's guard went back up. He didn't like her researching his town, his friends, his family. Then he found the second list. Provisions for the crew, plans on where they would stay, schedules for taping, possible locations. What she'd said in the bar was right. This project of Mandy's would fill the diner, and Delia's Salon, and the Hideaway with much needed patrons.

He sighed and put the folder open on the desk next to him. His eyes had been opened and taking it all in was a little overwhelming. Mandy was and had always been interested in him for this project. Right from day one when he and Mac had messed with her at the diner. But judging by her descriptions of him, she'd been attracted to him personally too from the very beginning.

The other eye-opener was that this project, show, whatever it was, might actually be good for this town. Mandy was right. The people of Pigeon Hollow deserved this chance. Delia and Mac and all the rest sure could use the extra business, and who was he to stop them?

Jared lifted the two pages of notes and moved them to the side to reveal a stack of blank consent forms. He considered for barely a heartbeat before taking one copy out. He located a pen, also on the seat under his butt, and started to fill in the spaces on the form. He signed his name at the bottom then placed it in the middle of the desk on top of the folder.

He glanced at the still-sleeping Mandy and decided to let her rest. As much as he wanted to slide between the sheets and into her, he had a lot to think about. Jared grabbed his shirt off the floor and pulled it over his head. With one more backward glance, he slipped quietly out of the door, making sure it was

locked behind him. In the bar parking lot, he got into his truck. He didn't feel like talking to Bobby again just yet. Instead, Jared started the engine and headed for the farm.

As he drove, he hoped he'd done the right thing. Even if he had made a mistake, there was one upside. By signing the consent form he'd insured Mandy would be around for at least two more months. Knowing that, he hoped even more that he'd done it for the right reasons.

## Chapter Six

Mandy woke with what felt like cotton balls in her mouth. She flung her arm over her face to block out the dim light filtering through the curtains. Why did she feel like such crap? As her body and mind began to wake, she felt the pull of sore muscles in her legs, and in other places too, muscles that hadn't been used in a very long time.

*Holy cow.* She sat straight up in bed. Bad idea, she realized, as she got lightheaded. Skipping dinner and drinking beer was never a good idea. It led to things like hangovers and sex with hot cowboys. Too bad she remembered that a little too late.

Mandy didn't know what was worse, her hangover or the fact that she'd had sex with Jared Gordon. *Shit.* She couldn't believe she'd broken her own rule and mixed business with pleasure. Very, very nice pleasure, but against her personal rules nonetheless. She'd only intended on flirting, not actually having sex with him—a fact she'd conveniently forgotten while drinking and aiming her foot at his crotch.

As she stumbled to the bathroom Mandy made a vow never to drink on an empty stomach again. She noted she wasn't vowing to herself never to have sex with Jared again. Interesting. Or maybe not. If her fuzzy brain remembered accurately, it had been incredible.

Of course it should have been great. After all, he was one unbelievably attractive specimen. In Los Angeles so often the reality didn't live up to the illusion created by the exterior packaging. No false advertising here though. In Jared's case, what you see is what you get, and what she gotten had been very, very good.

Mandy had to stop thinking of him and the possibility of a repeat of last night. She'd done a very bad thing getting physical with him. In a business where far too many women used sex to make their way to the top, she had vowed never to do so. It had cost her in her job too. On at least one occasion that she knew of, she'd been passed over for a less qualified bimbo who wasn't opposed to sweating up the casting couch with an executive.

Now that she was finally in a good place in her career, she still couldn't afford to compromise her morals. No worries. Last night with Jared would be just that. One night. That wasn't any sort of vow, just the cold hard reality of the situation. She'd pissed him off at the bar and he still hated the idea of the show. In fact, he'd reminded her enough times how angry he was at her all throughout the incredible sex. At least during the beginning. Neither one of them had managed many words after they'd really gotten into it.

Just thinking about it had the tension building low in her abdomen. Apparently sex with Jared was like eating Chinese food. It wasn't very long before you were hungry for more.

Sighing, she realized she would just have to get over losing Pigeon Hollow and use her second choice. Somehow, she'd make it work. She always did. Although, she had a very bad feeling giving up Pigeon Hollow would be easier than giving up Jared Gordon. The thought of never seeing him again caused another, different feeling in her gut. This one wasn't so nice.

Face washed and teeth brushed, Mandy pulled her hair into a quick bun and shuffled over to her suitcase. She would get dressed, get something to eat at the diner, and drive to the airport without looking back. She felt a little nausea in her belly and wrote it off to her hangover. It definitely was *not* disappointment that she would never see Jared again.

On the path past the desk on her way to the suitcase, Mandy stopped when she noticed her folder open on the desk. She walked backward and stood staring at the single piece of white paper. Her face grew hot, her heart began to pound, and her hands trembled. If she had been a cartoon character, the top of her head would have blown off by now. She reached out one shaky hand and picked up the signed consent form.

That one piece of paper, with that one signature, *Jared Gordon*, turned her into exactly the kind of woman she'd spent her entire career trying to avoid being. Jared had signed the paper after she'd had sex with him. He might as well have just left cash on the nightstand.

Still in a post-coital daze, Jared instinctively worked his way through the morning chores. Good thing his body remembered what to do, because his mind was back at the Hideaway with Mandy.

It was still early. He liked to get the heavy chores done before the heat of the day struck. Mandy would likely be still in bed, but she might be starting to wake about now.

Knowing her, his little bundle of contained energy, she couldn't lounge around long. He imagined her in bed still wearing the little silk thing she'd been in when he'd left her. It would have been really nice to wake up with her in his arms.

Why had he left her again? He sighed. He knew exactly why, but a night of contemplating the show and his decision had helped ease his mind.

He laughed to himself. She was probably going to be pissed as hell when she woke up and remembered what they'd done. Jared had a feeling Mandy wouldn't like that she'd given in to her desires. She'd particularly hate that he'd seen the softer side of her.

Her having a few beers in her had helped conquer the workaholic in her. She was a tiny thing, and a few beers could in someone smaller than he was, especially if she wasn't used to drinking.

Yup, she was really going to be pissed when she woke up and realized she'd been tipsy when they'd done it right on the dresser still half-dressed. Mmm, mmm. He liked her even more when she was angry.

Although, maybe when she saw the signed form, she'd be happy. Maybe she'd be so overwhelmed and grateful she'd throw herself into his arms. He definitely could handle her showing him her gratitude.

Jared climbed into the seat of the tractor thinking how, angry or grateful, he couldn't wait until he saw Mandy again. Whistling the whole drive out to the manure pile, he imagined what their next kiss would be like. This one wouldn't be fueled by anger. Maybe it would be gentle. Or even better, it would be because they wanted each other so badly they could barely breathe.

He dumped the contents of the tractor's bucket, turned and was on the trip back to the barn when he spotted her car.

Hot damn, she was earlier than he'd hoped. He raised the throttle and flew across the field so fast he was nearly bounced out of the seat when he hit a bump. When he was close enough to the barn, he abandoned the tractor. Turning it off right on the road where it stood, he pulled up the brake and hopped down. Jared walked as slowly as he could make himself and met her in front of the building where she'd parked her car.

Mandy's eyes were narrowed. She was huffing and puffing and looking so angry and adorable at the same time, he had to smile. She slapped a paper against his chest. Grabbing it before it fluttered to the ground, Jared saw it was the consent form he'd signed the night before.

"Did you sign that form just because I had sex with you?" The fury radiated off her.

He raised a brow and decided to tease her. "No. Did you sleep with me just so I'd sign the form?"

"No. You arrogant bastard. What the hell do you think I am?" She was working her way into quite a rant.

Lord, she was so hot when she was angry. Jared couldn't contain his attraction for his little hellcat any longer. Capturing her face in his hands, Jared crashed his lips into hers.

Still trying to yell at him, she mumbled what were probably more insults against his mouth for a second until she gave herself to the kiss. She leaned into him and soon the only sound was her soft groan as she wrapped her arms around his neck and her body pressed against his.

Jared was tempted to take her right there against the tractor until Mandy pulled away. "Do you really think I slept with you so you'd sign the form?"

He shook his head. "No. I never even considered that for a second."

"And you didn't sign because we had sex?"

Jared shook his head. "Nope."

Mandy looked up at him with a frown. "Then why did you sign?"

"I realized you were right. This town could use the business, and who the hell am I to stop them?"

"Really?"

"Really. Besides, how could I not sign after I read your notes calling me a cutie and a hottie." Jared waggled his eyebrows suggestively and had to deflect her hands as she slapped at his chest.

"You read my notes? Ooo, you are so infuriating." Her lips looked particularly tempting when she pursed them in anger.

He laughed and caught her hands in his. "And you are irresistible when you're mad. I plan on getting you angry as often as I can."

She shook her head. "You really know how to push my buttons, Jared Gordon."

Jared growled low in his throat and dipped his head low and close to hers. "I'd like a chance to get to push your buttons again real soon."

Leaning in to close the final distance separating them, he kissed her for not nearly long enough. She pulled back.

Her chest rose and fell beneath the silky top as she breathed in deeply. She shook her head. "This is impossible. I shouldn't have gotten involved with you at all, but we definitely can't be together once the taping starts."

"Fine, if it's a choice between being with you or taping this show, the decision is easy." He hadn't needed to consider that for very long at all. Grasping the consent form with two hands, he was about to rip it in half when she stopped him.

"Wait." Mandy laid a hand on his.

He paused, waiting.

After a moment of consideration, she let out a huff of breath. "We'll figure something out."

He wanted clarification before he released his hold on her precious consent form. "What exactly does that mean?"

Mandy sighed so deeply it was like the weight of the world was on her shoulders. "It means that we have to be very discreet, and we may have to sneak around after hours, but we can probably swing some time together once the crew is here."

He broke out into a delighted grin. Sneaking around sounded like fun. He hadn't "snuck" since he was a teen. He nodded and handed the paper back to her. "Okay then. But I'm gonna hold you to that."

She folded it neatly in thirds and slipped it into an invisible pocket in her skirt. She hung her head. "I have no doubt that you will."

He lifted her chin. "You want me as much as I want you, darlin'. Admit that to me, just once."

"This is hard for me, Jared."

He resisted making a joke about how *hard* it was for him too, and was extremely proud of his own restraint. Instead, he said something that he hoped was actually helpful.

"It's only hard for you because you're always so hard on yourself. Work is one thing, and I respect you for your dedication, but it shouldn't dominate your entire life. You need to take time to slow down, smell the roses, kiss the farmer..." With a smile, he lowered his mouth to just a breath from hers. He slid his hand up her thigh and under her short skirt. "Let me show you how relaxed I can make you."



His finger slid beneath the elastic of her underwear and she drew in a quick breath. “Jared. We’re in public.”

He’d never thought of his farm as public before. “We’re fine. Don’t worry.”

She swallowed hard and her eyes drifted shut as he found her sweet spot. “Your mother.”

“Out shopping two towns away. She’ll be gone for hours.” He nibbled on her earlobe.

“Your employees.” She was starting to sound breathless. He loved he could do that to her so easily.

“Out fixing a fence on the far side of the property. Won’t see them ’til lunch and we would see the truck coming long before they can see us anyway.” Running his tongue down her throat, Jared felt her pulse hammering away.

He noticed the small bruise he’d left there the night before and smiled. She was marked as his for all to see. The fact she hadn’t taken the time even to try to cover it up with makeup proved how angry she’d been at him. A man couldn’t rile a woman so easily unless he meant something to her. He had really gotten under her skin. Jared liked that idea too.

He dipped his finger into her warmth. It was addictive. He searched for more before slipping out to tease her some more, harder this time. At his touch, she took a shaky breath and started to tremble.

It appeared she had nothing else to say. He nuzzled her neck. “What’s the matter, darlin’? Run out of problems and excuses? You may have to actually enjoy yourself.”

“You are so...oh—” She was panting softly, but still managed to start to bitch at him. She never got to finish though as he redoubled his efforts and felt her shatter beneath his touch.

One hand still very busy, he wrapped his free arm around her waist as he felt her knees start to fold. “Hold on to me, darlin’. I got you.”

Mandy clung to his neck as she came. He didn’t let up until she was slumped against him. It was almost as good feeling and hearing her orgasm as having one of his own. Almost, but not quite, and it left Jared with a hard-on that he could hammer nails with.

Coming back to her senses, even though he wished she wouldn’t, Mandy moved away and pulled the bottom of her skirt down until she was decent again.

She looked up at him with heavily lidded baby blues. “I have to leave for LA for a bit to get everything ready for the taping. When I get back, this is one of the things we can’t do once the camera crews are here.”

“No more of this? Hmm. Is a blow job out of the question then?” He laughed as she raised one brow in his direction.

“Out here in the open? Yes. Definitely out of the question.”

He pulled her close and growled low near her ear. “So how about in the hay room?”

Her eyes opened wide and before she could protest, he grabbed her hand and pulled her into the barn.

Jared hopped up and sat on a waist-high stack of hay bales and pulled her between his legs. She looked around the room lit only by the sunlight filtering through the cracks in the walls. "I've never rolled in the hay before."

He laughed. "I don't recommend it. It's itchy. This was my brother's favorite hiding spot when he had a girl, not mine, but it'll serve our purposes."

"You have a brother?" She pulled back, looking a little too interested in his brothers.

"Yup. You didn't know? I've got two." He could see the wheels in her head turning, no doubt still thinking about work, even now.

"Do they live around here? Do they look anything like you?"

Stifling jealousy over her interest in his brothers, Jared decided to consider that last question a compliment. She could ask all she wanted and it didn't matter anyway. Jared still couldn't tell her his brothers were both covert special operatives and couldn't be on her little show.

He'd just have to get her mind back on him and off them and work.

"Hey there now, darlin'. They're both taken, and I plan on being more Gordon than you can handle as it is." He placed her one hand on the bulge in the crotch of his jeans. "Forget about them and leave me something to remember you by while you're away in LA."

With her hand on his belt, she smiled like the devil. "Oh, believe me. You're not going to forget me any time soon."

Mandy made short work of his belt and the fly on his jeans. She took a wider stance, and lowered her head. She was really going to do it. Right here in the hay room. His little city girl never failed to surprise him.

She reached into his underwear and stroked what he knew was rock hard and more than ready for a little attention. Jared drew in a sharp breath between his teeth. Mandy stroked him again, harder, and he couldn't stop his groan. As he watched she ran one perfectly manicured fingernail down the slit, letting it slip inside him just a bit. He hissed as a shudder ran through him. Smiling, she repeated the action, and got a similar reaction.

"Go easy there, darlin'."

"You didn't go easy on me, did you?"

She had a point there. He was about to concede that when she lowered her head and ran the tip of her tongue where her finger had just teased him.

As he willed his eyes to stay open so he could watch, she looked up. Her gaze met his and she slipped the tip of her tongue inside the tip of him. He knew she'd taste how ready he was to finish this. That was probably the reason she smiled at him before she began to work him in earnest, taking in the length of him.

Her mouth left him long enough for her to say, "Oh, and by the way, I like to use my teeth too." Mandy went on to prove that was absolutely true and Jared found it impossible to stay upright.

Booted feet still on the floor, he lay back on the bales until he was staring at the cobweb-filled ceiling. Last night on the dresser. Today on the hay. Maybe one day, they would actually make it to a bed. Not that he was complaining, but imagine what they could do on a nice big mattress. That was the last coherent thought he had once she pushed his briefs farther aside and began to use both hands and mouth on him.

She felt so good, he grit his teeth and prolonged it for as long as he could. Considering he'd been ready to go off the moment she started, he felt like he'd lasted an impressively long time, but he wasn't going to be able to fend off the inevitable for long.

Her mouth left him again. "You're holding back."

Gasping, he managed one word. "Yup."

He lifted his head and got a glimpse of her hand wrapped around him as her lips hovered just over him.

"Don't." She narrowed her eyes at him and then went back to work.

He'd been close before, but Mandy's renewed enthusiasm drove him over the edge. Her mouth, her hands, her tongue and fingers, they did things to him that no other woman had ever done. It all combined to make him shoot off like a cannon.

Good thing the boys really were clear on the other side of the farm because Jared came with a loud shout that he couldn't have controlled even if he'd wanted to. His body was still jumping with the aftershocks when she finally rose and smiled.

"Holy cow, woman." Jared was having trouble catching his breath. "What the hell did you do to me?"

"You needed to relax. I helped you." She shrugged, but there was nothing casual about the smoldering look she sent him.

Jared reached out and pulled her until she was sitting across his lap. "Mmm. Yeah, you did. Just remember that what's good for the goose, is good for the gander."

"And that means what?" She batted her eyelashes at him.

"It means you better watch that sweet ass of yours, darlin', because I sure will be." He slid his hand beneath her skirt and cupped her ass with one hand.

"I'll try and remember that." She pulled away. "But now, I have to go."

He drew her back to him and nuzzled her breasts through her blouse. "No, you don't."

She laughed. "Yes, I do. First of all, this suit probably cost as much as one of your horses and it shouldn't be doing any more rolling in the hay. Second, I have to catch my flight back to LA."

He sighed and released her, sliding her gently back onto her feet on the hay strewn floor.

"First of all, there is no way that suit cost anything near one of my horses, but I'll forgive that insult being you're a city girl and all. Second, go catch your flight, because the sooner you get to LA and do what you gotta do, the sooner you'll be back here with me." Jared kissed her softly.

"God, this is such a bad idea." Mandy shook her head in the dim light.

“Do I have to prove to you again that it’s not?” Standing, he took both of her hands in his, and then stepped forward until he was pressed against her.

“No. You don’t and I don’t have time now. This is a problem I have to deal with on my own.” She stepped back.

He frowned. He hadn’t thought of her being with him as a problem, but she seemed to see it as one.

“A problem shared by two is only half as big, darlin’. Remember that.” He lowered his head and kissed her long and hard as she let his tongue tangle with hers. Then he pulled away. “That was something to remember me by.”

“Don’t worry. I won’t be forgetting you anytime soon, Jared Gordon.” She turned and left, but not without a backward glance that told him she regretted going as much as he hated seeing her go.

Then he realized he was standing alone in the hay room with his jeans wide open and his dick hanging out. Blowing out a long, slow breath as he relived the past few minutes, Jared righted himself and tried not to miss her already.

Footsteps interrupted his reminiscences.

“Well, well, well. You two have a little romp in the hay room?” Bobby grinned wide.

Good thing Bobby hadn’t been a few minutes earlier. Although, being deputy sheriff, Bobby had probably caught every young person in this town doing it at least once.

Jared rolled his eyes and slowly shook his head. “No.”

“Don’t bother trying to deny it. I saw your city girl getting into her car. There was hay in her hair. She looked like she wanted to crawl into a hole in the ground when I pointed it out to her. Never thought I’d see that one blush, but she was blushing all right.”

“I’m not denying it.” Jared screwed up his mouth unhappily. Poor Mandy. She was having enough trouble as it was with this situation, although why, he didn’t know. To top it off, here his supposed friend was teasing her. “Don’t give her a hard time anymore, Bobby. I like her. A lot.”

“What else is new?” Bobby laughed.

“I mean it.” Sure Jared had his share of women, but things felt different with Mandy. He needed Bobby to see that.

“This isn’t just two adults scratching an itch the way it was with Sue Ann?”

“No way. This is nothing like Sue Ann and me.” Jared shook his head violently. He blew out a frustrated breath. “Damn, I’ve got it bad. I miss Mandy already and she’s barely out of the drive. What the hell am I gonna do when the show is over and she goes back to California for good?”

“Show?” Bobby appeared about as surprised as Jared thought he would at that little piece of news.

“Yup. I signed her consent form to be in the show.”

Bobby raised a brow. “Really? Hmm.”

“Hmm, what?” Jared crossed his arms in front of him.

“I’m just wondering why, that’s all. You sure were set against it before you left the bar last night to go see Mandy in her hotel room.”

He knew exactly what his friend was insinuating. “I signed because it’s good for this town, that’s why.”

Jared didn’t add that it was good for him too. He figured he had two months to convince Mandy she couldn’t live without him. That should be plenty of time. Hell, he was a Gordon, after all.

## Chapter Seven

Never ever in her entire career had Mandy mixed business with pleasure. Yet here she was driving as fast as she could from the airport, rushing back to Jared Gordon and she was actually feeling not so bad about it.

She couldn't deny the attraction between them was there from the very beginning, regardless of their business dealings. She believed him when he said he hadn't signed the consent form because she'd slept with him, but because it was good for the town.

Mandy had finally stopped beating herself up about all that had happened between them after the first week back in LA. After that, she started to enjoy the idea of being Jared's city girl, as he called her. How crazy was that? A horseman from Pigeon Hollow and a television producer from LA. They were taking the term long-distance relationship to a whole new level.

Of course, Jared's nightly phone calls helped bridge that long distance. His smooth southern voice could, and did, do things to her that most men couldn't accomplish with their entire body. Not to say that she wasn't looking forward to enjoying his whole body too. She definitely was.

The rest of the production crew had flown with her, and were currently divided among a few rented minivans, along with their equipment. They'd go directly to the Hideaway to get settled in, but Mandy had claimed she had errands to run so she could be alone in the car and go directly to Jared.

The phone rang and, speak of the devil, Jared's name came on the screen.

"Hi." She smiled uncontrollably just hearing his voice. Damn, she was in big trouble.

"Hey, darlin'. You close?"

"Just outside of town."

"Good. Come straight to me, darlin'. I'll be waiting to welcome you back."

She laughed, but there was nothing funny about the desire welling deep inside her. "I'm sure you will be. Are you home?"

"I'm at the diner with Bobby, but I'll be leaving shortly. I'll be home before you get there." She recognized the deep timber of his voice. It was a tone she was convinced he reserved only for her. Mandy liked that a lot.

"Okay. I'll see you in a few minutes." She wanted to hear that voice in person and not through a cell phone.

“Mmm. I can’t wait.” She disconnected the call and slammed the accelerator. What was the good of renting a car with a nice big engine if you didn’t use it?

She sped down the highway and didn’t slow until she was turning onto Main Street, smiling as she took in the familiar sights. It was nice to know some things didn’t change.

In front of the diner was a Gordon Equine truck parked next to Bobby’s official deputy sheriff’s car. It looked like she wasn’t going to have to drive all the way to the farm alone after all. She could hop in Jared’s truck with him, and maybe even give him a little surprise while he drove.

It was lunchtime, so there was an uncharacteristic amount of traffic and no parking spaces in front of the diner. Mandy was forced to drive farther until she finally found a spot. She turned off the engine, got out and locked the door behind her, but it was an effort to restrain herself from simply abandoning the car and sprinting to the diner.

As it was, she was so focused on the single-minded goal of reaching Jared that she wasn’t paying attention to where she was walking. As if out of nowhere, the chubby, ponytail-wearing waitress from the diner and a trashily dressed woman with a bad bleach job smacked directly into her. Mandy stumbled.

“Oh, you’re back. Good. Sue Ann has something to tell you.” Misty moved to the side and her over-processed friend stepped forward.

“So, I hear you’re after Jared Gordon.”

“You heard wrong, sweetheart. I’m not after him at all. He’s already mine.” Why did Mandy feel like she was back in middle school? Worse, why was she letting these women get to her so badly she was acting like she was?

Mandy went to push past them, but they blocked her path.

Sue Ann grabbed her arm. “Maybe you’ll change your mind when you hear this.”

She shook off the hold. “Doubtful. Now excuse me.”

Mandy walked away and felt the girl smack her hard on the shoulder before she spun her around. But it wasn’t the physical blow that nearly brought Mandy to her knees. It was what Jared’s ex-girlfriend told her that made the whole world tilt.

Jared finished the last bite of his hamburger and glanced over at the counter. As tempting as the pies in the diner’s glass display case looked, he knew Mama had baked a fresh blackberry pie that morning. That was worth waiting for, no question. Besides that, he was sitting right in the window with the sun beating on his back. It was hot, a/c or not. The diner was more crowded than usual so he and Bobby had been forced to take the only table available, even though it was up against the front window.

The real reason he was in a hurry to get out of here, the only reason that mattered, was that Mandy had flown in today. She said she would drive directly to the farm when he’d talked to her just a few minutes ago.

His heart raced at the thought of seeing her again. Phone sex with her was great, but it was not the real thing.

He threw cash for his meal on the table and was about to tell Bobby he was out of here when Bobby leaned forward, looking out the window. "Is Mandy meeting you here or at the farm?"

"She said the farm. Why? Is she here?" Jared twisted in his seat, straining to see outside with the glare.

Bobby let out a breath. "Yeah, with Sue Ann."

"Oh shit." Jared launched himself away from the table, sending the chair flying behind him.

He was out the door and on the sidewalk for what seemed like forever before Bobby caught up with him. Jared strode forward to the group of three women comprised of Mandy, Sue Ann and Misty. The look on Mandy's face didn't bode well.

"Mandy, darlin'." He reached out to touch her.

She looked down at his hand, slowly shook her head, and backed away from him. Jared took a step forward and grabbed her by both shoulders.

"Let go of me, Jared." She closed her eyes, as if she couldn't bear to look at him.

"No. I don't know what Sue Ann told you, but you have to give me a chance to defend myself." Shit, that had sounded like he was guilty of something, which he was pretty sure he wasn't. God only knew what the hell Sue Ann had told her.

Mandy was breathing hard enough to hyperventilate. "Bobby, make him take his hands off of me now."

Bobby was beside him suddenly. "Jared."

"No." Jared shook his head.

He felt Bobby's hand on his shoulder. A gentle warning, he supposed. Wasn't this laughable? His best friend protecting his own girlfriend from him. As if he could ever hurt Mandy. He shook his head again at the ridiculous idea and dropped his hands from her shoulders. With one last hurt-filled look, Mandy turned and got into her car, peeling out into traffic as she drove away.

Jared turned on Sue Ann. "What the hell did you tell her?"

Sue Ann shrugged. "Nothing but the truth."

He stepped closer and glared down at the girl he actually used to think was attractive. "And what warped version of the *truth* was that?"

"I'm late."

"No. That's impossible. You know we used birth control every single time." Jared enunciated every word to prove his point. His stomach clenched and his lunch threatened to work its way back up his throat.

"Birth control fails." He longed to wipe the smug expression off her face.



“You said you were on the pill *and* I used a condom every single fucking time. Don’t you dare lie and tell me you’re pregnant by me.” Then a thought struck him, clear as day. “Who else have you been screwing, Sue Ann?”

Maybe Sue Ann was telling the truth. She may well be pregnant, but it sure as hell wasn’t by him. She blanched and he was sure he’d hit on the truth, but she still denied it.

He stopped listening to her claims and excuses. “Fine. Say whatever you want. We’ll go to the doc for a paternity test today. Right fucking now, Sue Ann.” He grabbed her arm roughly, and Bobby was beside him again. “Back off, Bobby. Leave me and the supposed mother of my child alone until I can get the doc to prove she’s a liar.”

Sue Ann dug her heels into the sidewalk. “No, we can’t go to the doc. I mean I’m sure those tests can hurt the baby. I refuse to have one.”

Just then, Misty piped in. “Sue Ann, hadn’t you better take the pregnancy test you bought at the drugstore first? You’re only like a day late.”

“What?” Jared’s eyes opened wide and he squeezed her arm harder.

Bobby’s hand covered his. “Jared. Enough.”

He released her and watched his handprint on her arm turn from white to red.

“You don’t even know if you’re pregnant and you’re telling my girlfriend about it.” He shook his head with disgust. “I’m embarrassed I even let you get me angry, Sue Ann, because you are nothing but pitiful. God help the man that ends up with you.”

He spun on his heel and strode to his truck, fumbling in his jeans pocket for the keys.

Once again, Bobby was beside him. “Where you going, Jared?”

“To the Hideaway. I hope to hell she went there and not the airport.”

“I’ll drive. Give me your keys.”

“The hell you will.”

“Jared, give me the damn keys. You’re so angry you’re shaking. Neither you nor Mandy should be driving right now. Since I can’t do anything about her, I’m doing something about you.”

Jared huffed out a breath and slapped the keys in Bobby’s outstretched hands. “Fine. But hurry up.”

Bobby scowled. “I’m a deputy sheriff. I can’t go speeding down Main Street, even if I am in your truck.”

“I knew I should have drove.” Jared shook his head.

The trip to the motel seemed to take forever, although Jared knew it was only a few miles. When they finally arrived, he saw the place was packed with vans and people unloading them. The crew for the show. Jared took their presence as a good sign. No matter how hurt she was, Mandy was in charge of the production of this show. She wouldn’t leave town, if only because of that.

His anger at Sue Ann blossomed all over again as he knocked on the door of the unit where Mandy's car was parked.

Some young thing that he'd never seen before opened the door a crack. "Yes?"

For the first time, he wondered if he had the wrong door. "Is Mandy Morris in this room?"

"Who are you?"

Jared's instincts told him Mandy was hiding inside. He pushed his palm against the door, only to find the chain was engaged.

He leaned into the crack. "Mandy. Please, darlin'. Talk to me."

With Bobby standing directly behind him, he knew he couldn't break the door in to get to Mandy, as tempting as it was.

The girl guarding the door looked away from him and into the room then turned back to him. "Excuse me for a minute."

The door slammed in his face and Jared ran his hand over his mouth and chin with frustration. He felt Bobby's hand on his shoulder.

Jared set his jaw. "Bobby, if you say I told you so about Sue Ann one more time, I'll clock you. Deputy or not."

Bobby stepped around him. "Well, I'd like to see you try, but what I was going to say was this. She'll listen. It just might take a bit of time. In the meantime don't you go doing any thing crazy."

Jared listened, and although he didn't like what he heard, Bobby was right. He had to keep his cool here. Mandy was strung so tightly, Jared always knew that if she ever snapped it would be really bad. He'd assumed her work would be the thing to throw her over the edge eventually, but it seemed Sue Ann had gotten to her first.

The door opened fully and the girl walked out, eyeing him the entire time. Jared didn't wait for an invitation and shot inside. One look at Mandy confirmed his suspicion. She'd cracked and it was bad.

She sat in the room's only chair. Head buried in her arms while she hugged her knees. He couldn't see her face, but he heard her snuffle as she rocked herself.

His heart broke. He bent and scooped her up in his arms, sitting in the chair with her in his lap. He kissed her hair and gently rocked her. "Shh. Don't cry."

Her soft snuffles turned into all-out heaving, gasping sobs. She always did tend to be contrary, and now was no different. He shook his head, held her tighter and let her cry until she was all cried out. Since she was never one to do anything halfway, that took a while.

He knew she was finished when she raised her head and one tiny fist smashed into his arm. "You bastard."

That nearly made him smile. He'd take anger over tears any day. Luckily, he'd stopped himself from actually smiling at her, because that would have probably earned him more than just a punch in the arm.

"I'm going to tell you the God's honest truth, and if you don't want to believe me, Bobby is right outside. He'll back me up. I admit to being a stupid idiot who used to sleep with Sue Ann, but I ended it before you ever came to this town and turned my life upside down." At her frown, he added, "I meant that last part in a good way."

"But she said she's—"

"She lied. If she's even pregnant, which is up for debate, there is no way in hell it's mine because I used protection every single time. I'll do anything you want. DNA tests. Lie detector. Whatever. I won't let her or anything else take you away from me."

Her face crumpled, but she threw her arms around his neck and held on tight. He figured it was a good thing, until she pulled back and looked fiercely at him.

"But, Jared, really. Her? Her roots are so far past a touch up, her hair is practically two-tone. She's wearing sparkly blue eye shadow and a tube top. How in the world could the same man be attracted to both her and me? We might as well be from different planets."

"You're telling me." He snorted.

She held her hands out in an I'm-waiting-for-an-answer gesture.

He finally gave in. She wanted an explanation, then he'd give her one. "All right. I'm gonna tell you something about how men see women. There are women we're attracted to for a night or two because they're easy. Then there are those we're interested in for the long haul, because those are the keepers."

She considered that for a moment. "Which one am I?"

Jared laughed out loud. He knew there was only one answer she wanted to hear. Luckily, it happened to be the truth. "Darlin', there ain't nothing easy about you. You're the hardest damn woman I've ever had the pleasure of knowing."

Yup, she was definitely a keeper. Somehow, someway, he'd find a way to keep her here in Pigeon Hollow with him. Jared snuggled his face against Mandy's hair. He breathed in deeply, savoring the scent of her.

"We all right?" He felt her nod. Running his hand up and down her spine, he bent his head and kissed each closed eye-lid softly. "Can I show you how very much I've missed you now?"

She opened her still-tear-reddened eyes. She looked up at him and drew in a shaky breath. "Yeah, I think I'd like that."

He smiled and kissed her lips. Then closed his eyes and groaned. "Shit. Bobby drove my truck here. He's outside with no ride back to his car in town and he's on duty."

Snuggling closer against him, Mandy spoke into his chest. "He can take your truck back then. You're not going to need it. Or even better, Christy can drive Bobby in the rental car. I want her to get to know him. She's going to be on the crew assigned to him."

Admiration that Mandy had gone from weeping woman to hard-ass boss in the blink of an eye aside, he couldn't help but wonder who she was talking about that would be shadowing his best friend twenty-four-seven. "Who's Christy?"

"My associate producer. The one who convinced me to let you in the door when I didn't want to."

"Well then, I owe her already for that. I might as well owe her for driving Bobby back to town too." Bobby should thank him for it. Christy was cute. Just Bobby's type. Then an unpleasant thought hit Jared. "You really weren't going to let me in?"

Mandy pursed her lips. "I guess I would have given in eventually. Either that, or you would have broken down the door."

He laughed. "You think you know me pretty well, don't ya?"

"Mmm, hmm." She nodded.

"Then tell me what I'm thinking right now."

She smiled. "I'm sitting in your lap. I can feel exactly what you're thinking about right now."

Actually, he had been about to tell her he loved her, but he decided to save that for some romantic moonlit night in the near future. One where she wasn't fresh from crying and Sue Ann was a long-distant memory.

Instead, Jared picked her up and carried her to the bed. "Can't hide anything from you, can I?"

Her arms clasped around his neck. "No, you can't. You better remember that."

"I surely will, darlin'. I surely will." He smiled.

He had the woman he loved in his arms and a nice big bed beneath them finally. Life, he decided, was good.

## 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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Hooked

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

## Jimmy

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*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.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Jimmy:*

"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.

*Accept no substitute...for love.*

## Take a Chance on Me

© 2010 Kate Davies

### *The Lady Doth Protest Too Much*

Jessica Martin is determined to earn a permanent teaching position at Summit High School. That means hard work, dedication, and even volunteering extra time to direct the school's Shakespeare play. Which leaves no room for romance—especially with a co-worker. She didn't factor in the school's sexy security officer and the delicious fantasies he inspires.

### *Too Much Of A Good Thing*

Former cop Tom Cameron likes his job. Or he did, until the new substitute busted his orderly life right open. Now, he can't seem to avoid her—deserted hallways, empty theaters, classrooms after dark—but he's got too many skeletons in his closet to risk his heart again. Asking her out to distract her from the play's, well, *drama* is a friendly gesture. Nothing more.

### *The Course Of True Love Never Did Run Smooth*

Their chemistry could melt down the science lab, and before long they're burning up the sheets off-campus. And uncovering raw emotions—a stark reminder that love isn't in their curricula. When a troubled student goes over the edge, though, the need to stop a tragedy brings them right back where they started—face to face with fat

Warning: This book contains sexy encounters in classrooms, inappropriate use of school facilities, backstage shenanigans, and illicit activities on a ferryboat.

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Take a Chance on Me:*

Jessica was late.

Her first day, and she was actually going to walk in late. She grabbed her blue canvas bag and strode toward the front of the school, checking her watch for the umpteenth time. *Pull yourself together*, she scolded herself. *You need to make a good impression or—*Oof! She pitched forward onto her hands and knees, tripped by a tree root poking up through the old concrete sidewalk.

Papers flew out of her book bag, spilling into the gutter and fluttering across the street. She stomped after them, grabbing her papers out of random puddles and shoving them, damp and crumpled, back into the bag. Slinging it over her shoulder once again, she walked quickly to the front steps.

How many steps were there anyway? They hadn't looked this steep when she'd arrived for her interview last week.

But then she was so excited to even *have* an interview, she'd practically flown up the stairs on her way to the appointment. After getting her certification in December, she'd assumed she would spend the

remainder of the school year subbing. But here she was, two weeks into January, and actually starting a job teaching in her subject area. Of course, it was only through the end of the school year, but still...

Jessica shook her head and began the trek up the stairs.

If only her alarm hadn't chosen today of all days to give up the ghost. If only every stoplight in town hadn't conspired against her. If only. She sighed. No use worrying about it now.

At least she had prep for her first period, so her students wouldn't be standing in the hallway knocking on her classroom door. But it would have been nice to actually have that prep time to, well, prepare.

Jessica pulled the heavy door open and walked through, glancing down the hall in both directions. Where exactly was her classroom? The office, of course, was directly in front of her, but there was no way she could waltz in forty-five minutes late and ask directions.

She rummaged around in her bag and pulled out page after page of dirty, crumpled paper until she found the school map, which had been included in her orientation packet. She squinted, brushing ineffectually at the muddy footprint obscuring the drawing. Heels clicking on the aggregate flooring, Jessica walked down the hallway. *Okay, if this is the office, then the language arts wing should be down the main hall and to the—*

"Hall pass."

Startled, Jessica stopped mid-stride.

A man in a charcoal-gray jacket leaned against a concrete support post, one hand in his pocket, the other stretched out in front of her. Puzzled, she started to speak, but a burst of static pulled his attention away. He tilted his head toward his shoulder, listening to the mumbled voice over the walkie-talkie, then muttered into the microphone attached to his lapel. Jessica sidestepped his outstretched hand and continued to walk down the hallway.

"I said, hall pass."

Jessica turned around.

He pushed away from the post and took a step toward her, arms crossed. "Don't think you can get out of this just because I got a call."

"Get out of what?" Jessica asked. "Look, Mr.—"

"Cameron."

"Mr. Cameron, not to be rude, but I'm late, and—"

"Exactly. That's why I need your hall pass."

"I don't have a hall pass, I'm—"

"Fine. Follow me."

"But, Mr. Cameron..."

He fixed her with a level stare. "Follow me." He turned on his heel and strode towards the main office.

Jessica rolled her eyes and followed. At least she could ask this Mr. Cameron where her classroom was instead of wandering around aimlessly until the bell rang. Not that she particularly wanted to show her face in the office—she'd hoped to slink to her classroom and pretend she had been there since 7:30.

Oh, well. Some things couldn't be helped, and it was probably better to deal with this misunderstanding in the office rather than hashing it out in the hall.

Mr. Cameron pushed the door open, glancing over his shoulder to make sure Jessica was behind him. She increased her speed, almost jogging in an attempt to keep up with his long-legged stride. He turned past the staff mailboxes and walked into a small office, flicking on the light as he entered. Sitting down behind a scarred metal desk, he indicated the seat opposite with a nod of his head.

Jessica sat and opened her mouth to speak. Mr. Cameron held up his hand.

"Don't bother," he said. "I've heard every excuse in the book. Probably even used a few back in the day. Just give me your name and I'll fill out the detention slip."

"Detention slip? Mr. Cameron—"

"I'm sorry, but rules are rules. In the hall without a pass, automatic detention."

Jessica shook her head in exasperation. "If you would just give me a minute to explain," she began, but he cut her off again.

"That's enough, young lady. Your name, please."

"Good morning, Tom. I see you've met Maggie's replacement." Both heads swiveled toward the open doorway where a gray-haired woman in a green and black checked dress stood smiling at them.

Mr. Cameron blinked twice, his brow furrowed. "Replacement? You mean she's a—"

"I believe the word is teacher," Jessica supplied, arching an eyebrow at him. She stuck out her hand. "Jessica Martin."

He hesitated, then took her hand in his. "Tom Cameron."

His grip was strong, confident, professional. The handshake lasted only a second or two, but Jessica glanced at her palm, startled, as a pulse of energy lingered after contact was broken. Darting a look at Tom, she watched his Adam's apple bob as he swallowed. Had that arrogant, condescending man noticed the spark too?

Mentally, she shook off the absurd notion and refocused her attention on Celeste Winters, principal of Summit High.

"Good to see you, Jessica," she said. "I see you've met Summit's security officer. Tom keeps an eye out for trouble, helps with discipline issues, that sort of thing. If you have any difficulties, I'm sure he'd be happy to help you out."

Jessica wouldn't have chosen the word happy to describe Tom Cameron.

"Oh, by the way," Celeste added. "I walked past your classroom this morning and saw that it was dark. Anything I should know about?"

Cheeks burning, Jessica shook her head. “Bad morning,” she mumbled. “It won’t happen again.”

“That’s good. However, you need to get down there soon since the bell is going to ring any minute now. In fact,” she added, looking at Mr. Cameron, “why don’t you show Jessica to her room, Tom? She won’t have to wander the halls, and you can keep an eye out for truancies.” She paused. “Student truancies, that is.” She turned and walked briskly down the hall to her office.

Jessica bit her lip, staring at the scarred desktop. Everything on it was tidy, from the color-coordinated notations on the calendar/blotter to the stack of papers in the to-be-filed box. Even the pens in the SHS mug stood at attention. Mr. Cameron would probably run screaming if he ever saw her desk at home.

She’d only been here five minutes and she’d already made a great first impression. The principal thought she was a slacker and the security guy thought she was a student skipping class. What a wonderful way to start out a new job—especially when she wanted a full-contract offer at the end of the year.

An irritated “ahem” reminded her that Mr. Cameron was waiting to take her to her classroom. He’d probably report back to Ms. Winters as soon as she was safely deposited. “Situation handled, ma’am. The errant staffer has been neutralized.” As if she needed a babysitter.

Of course, showing up forty-five minutes late on her first day was not the way to prove her competence.

Jessica stood and hitched her book bag over her shoulder. A few wrinkled papers tumbled out and she stooped to grab them off the floor. Straightening, she glanced at the doorway. Tom Cameron was standing there, arms folded. Jessica crammed the papers back into the bag. He nodded curtly and then marched down the narrow office hallway and out the main door.

Jessica followed at a trot, stiff-arming the door to prevent it from slamming in her face. She made a face at Mr. Cameron’s retreating back. Would it kill him to walk at a reasonable pace? Maybe show a little consideration for the new hire—especially bearing in mind she had a slightly shorter stride, not to mention slightly higher heels?

She shook her head and continued to trail in Mr. Cameron’s wake. Even as irritated as she was with him, there was no denying he was nice to look at. He walked confidently, back straight. His charcoal jacket tugged gently at broad shoulders and a strong back.

And below that jacket—Jessica swallowed. Damn, he was fine. Dragging her gaze away from his world-class ass—probably best not to be caught checking out a fellow staff member’s backside on the first day—she studied Tom’s shoes instead. Black wingtips, polished to a glossy shine. Almost as shiny as his hair, dark blond with sparks of gold picked out by the artificial white glow from the hallway’s fluorescent lights.

Lost in thought, Jessica walked right into Tom’s back, her nose wedged between his shoulder blades. She jumped backwards, stumbling a little in her oh-so-professional two-inch heels.

“Sorry.” She crossed her arms over her chest. Yes, he definitely had a strong back.

“Your classroom.” He rapped on the doorframe with his knuckles. “Welcome to Summit High.” Then he turned and continued down the hallway.

Jessica stood staring after him as he walked away. He tucked one hand in his pocket, lifting the jacket up slightly, and yes, he had a seriously nice ass. *Too bad he’s such a jerk.*



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