Silhouette®

Her Millionaire Marine

CATHIE LINZ

SILHOUETTE Romance®

MEN OF HONOR

Cathie Linz
Her Millionaire Marine

Аннотация

MARINES WEREN'T HER TYPE…In Kate Bradley's opinion, handsome daredevils didn't make good husbands. But that didn't stop her from fantasizing about Striker Kozlowski–the marine she'd secretly adored since she was seventeen. Now, she needed to make sure Striker fulfilled his grandfather's will–while keeping her true feelings under wraps….OR SO SHE KEPT TELLING HERSELFIt wasn't Striker's idea to head back to Texas or to be cooped up in a boardroom with a gorgeous ice princess who had him feeling like a nervous recruit. He could accomplish the military's toughest missions, but could he take the biggest risk of alL.on love?

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What if Striker didn't leave? What if the Marine Corps ordered him to stay?

She closed her eyes for a moment, imagining what it would be like…having him in her life permanently. Having this traveling marine settle down, marry, have kids. All with her.

"Do you want more?" Striker asked.

Her eyes flew open. "More?" Her voice was husky. No, she wouldn't want more than that. Having him safe by her side would be a dream come true.

But dreams didn't come true. Not for her.

Dear Reader,

Spring is here. And what better way to enjoy nature's renewed vigor than with an afternoon on the porch swing, lost in four brand-new stories of love everlasting from Silhouette Romance?

New York Times bestselling author Diana Palmer leads our lineup this month with Cattleman's Pride (#1718), the latest in her LONG, TALL TEXANS miniseries. Get to know the stubborn, seductive rancher and the shy innocent woman who yearns for him. Will her love be enough to corral his heart?

When a single, soon-to-be mom hires a matchmaker to find her a practical husband, she makes it clear she doesn't want a man who inspires reckless passion…but then she meets her new boss! In Myrna Mackenzie's miniseries THE BRIDES OF RED ROSE classic legends take on a whole new interpretation. Don't miss Midas's Bride (#1719)!

Her Millionaire Marine (#1720), from USA TODAY

bestselling author Cathie Linz, and part of her MEN OF HONOR miniseries, finds a beautiful lawyer making sure the marine she secretly adores fulfills his grandfather's will. Falling in love with the daredevil is not part of the plan!

And Judith McWilliams's Dr. Charming (#1721) puts a stranded female traveler in the path of a mysterious doctor; she agrees to take a job in exchange for a temporary home—with him. Now, this man makes her want to explore passion, but can he tempt her to take the ultimate risk?

Sincerely,

Mavis C. Allen

Associate Senior Editor

Her Millionaire Marine
Cathie Linz

www.millsandboon.co.uk

This book is dedicated to “AdCappy” Sarah Galanter, an extraordinary woman who loved romances and loved life. She was one in a million. She’s greatly missed and will not be forgotten by those of us in her “crew.”

Books by Cathie Linz

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Husband Needed #1098

CATHIE LINZ

left her career in a university law library to become a USA TODAY bestselling author of contemporary romances. She is the recipient of the highly coveted Storyteller of the Year Award given by Romantic Times and was recently nominated for a Love and Laughter Career Achievement Award for the delightful humor in her books.

Although Cathie loves to travel, she is always glad to get back home to her family, her various cats, her trusty computer and her

hidden cache of Oreo cookies!

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Chapter One

Striker Kozlowski was a dead man. He knew it the instant he saw the top brass gathered in his C.O.'s office at the Marine Corps headquarters in Quantico, Virginia. His buddy Justice Wilder had warned him that one day he'd have to answer for his hotshot ways. Apparently today was that day.

None of Striker's thoughts showed as he saluted and stood at attention.

"At ease," Commander Jenks said. "As you know, this is a delicate situation, and while I can understand your reluctance to proceed, the bottom line is that there's only one thing to be done here."

"Agreed, sir," Striker said. "I'll apologize to the naval officer."

"What naval officer?"

So this wasn't about his fight with a naval officer in a bar last night? "Nothing, sir."

"As I was saying, we're all aware that you and your grandfather weren't close. He made no bones about the fact that he didn't approve of you being a Marine and he informed every senator and every general he met of that fact. I speak for us all when I say you have our condolences."

"Thank you, sir." Condolences because he and his grandfather hadn't gotten along for years, or because the old man had never approved of Striker joining the Marine Corps instead of his oil

company?

"His sudden death must still be dealt with," Commander Jenks added.

Striker went cold. His grandfather was dead? Not possible. Not Hank King, the mega-millionaire Texas oilman who was tougher than the walls of the Alamo and more stubborn than a packload of mules. Gone. Striker had a hard time wrapping his mind around that concept.

Somehow he'd always thought there would be time to sort things out, to mend the fences that had been broken when Striker had followed in his father's footsteps instead of falling into line by joining his maternal grandfather's oil business.

Striker had been trained well by the Marines, so his expression remained impassive as his emotions shut down and he went on autopilot.

The office door opened. "Ms. Kate Bradley, sir," the gunnery sergeant announced.

A female civilian rushed into the room on a cloud of expensive perfume. "I'm sorry I'm late, gentlemen," she said.

Striker recognized her type immediately. She was a ritzy blonde with high cheekbones and an elegant way about her. Her silky hair was drawn away from her face into some kind of intricate knot. The business suit she wore only hinted at the lush body beneath it. He was no expert on women's footwear, but he was willing to bet that the shoes she wore were Italian and probably cost more than he made in a month.

She radiated class. She also radiated sex appeal. And she was looking at him with disapproval even though he had yet to say a word. “I’ve been trying to get in touch with you since yesterday,” Kate said, her cultured voice running over him like silk, “but you didn’t return my calls.”

“I apologize, ma’am.” He said the words but he didn’t mean them. “You never said what your call was in regard to.”

“I assumed you’d already told Striker about his grandfather’s passing,” Commander Jenks said, clearly not pleased at this glitch in the game plan and holding Kate responsible for that fact.

She didn’t even squirm, holding her ground as only those born and bred to wealth can. “As I said, I wasn’t able to reach him.”

“Let’s cut to the bottom line here,” Commander Jenks said. “Striker, your grandfather left an unusual codicil in his will regarding you.”

“Sir, my grandfather disowned me years ago,” Striker said.

“No, he didn’t,” Kate said. “He may have talked about doing that, but it was all bluster.” Dropping onto a chair, she balanced her slim leather briefcase on her lap before opening it and removing a sheaf of papers. “I’ve come here today as his attorney and the executor of his will. His wish is that you come to Texas and run King Oil for a period of not less than two months.”

“That dog’s just not gonna hunt,” Striker said, deliberately using a Texas phrase. “I’m a Marine, ma’am, not an oilman. I haven’t had any contact with Hank King since I was nineteen and joined the Marines. That’s been twelve years now. And even

before that, we never had much of a relationship given the fact that he never approved of his only child, my mother, marrying a penniless nobody Marine named Kozlowski."

"I tried to reach your mother to give her the news, but there was no answer at the number I had for her."

"My parents are taking an extended vacation in a rented RV out west," Striker replied. "I'll contact them on their cell phone right after this meeting."

"I'm sorry for your loss," Kate said softly. "If it makes it any easier for you, Hank died in his sleep. He wasn't in any pain."

"As I said, I barely knew the man." Striker's voice was remote.

"Be that as it may, the terms of the will are very clear. You are to return to Texas with me and run King Oil for two months."

Even saying the words "return to Texas" made Kate's stomach feel fluttery. She was trying to stay calm, but this meeting was much harder than she'd anticipated. When she'd walked into the office on the Marine base and realized that his commanding officer had broken the news to Striker, she'd felt both guilt and relief.

Not that Striker looked upset or emotional. He looked incredible but tough. The last time she'd seen him had been the last time he'd visited Hank. Striker had always been good-looking with his dark hair and green eyes, but the nineteen-year-old boy had grown into a combat-hardened man. There were lines on his face and shadows in his eyes that only hinted at the hardships he'd seen.

He obviously didn't remember meeting her that summer he'd worked on his grandfather's ranch so many years ago. But she remembered him. He'd played a pivotal part in her life, even though they'd barely met.

Closing her eyes, she was transported back in time to that fateful summer, when she was seventeen and had often ridden her Arabian horse Midnight over to the spring-fed pond that bordered their ranch with Hank's. The first time she'd seen Striker, he'd been stark naked, skinny-dipping in the cool waters on a sultry day. She could still see the droplets of water running down his muscular, tanned body. She'd silently watched him walk into the water, without making her presence known.

Not the proper behavior for a well-bred girl like herself. Especially given the fact that she was going steady with Ted at the time, and would become engaged to him a few months later, on her eighteenth birthday.

Kate's sexual fantasies about Striker had started then, and had only continued to increase that steamy summer. She'd seen Striker several other times, often finding him tossing hay in the barn wearing only well-washed jeans and a sheen of sweat.

Her mouth went dry at the memory….

Oh, yes, Striker had made a huge impression on her fanciful mind.

And now here she was, expected to return to Texas with him.

What on earth had made Hank think that she'd be able to deal with Striker? She'd tried to tell the oil baron that this was a bad

idea, but he hadn't listened to her. The men in her life never seemed to listen to her. Not really.

"I'm thinking of going into public law," she'd told her father in her last year of law school.

"Nonsense. You'll join the family firm like we planned. You're a Bradley, and Bradleys always do as expected."

And so, in the end, she had. She'd done what was expected, including getting engaged to Ted Went-worth…with fatal results.

Kate took a soothing breath, before reminding herself that this was no time to be reviewing her life choices. She had to keep her focus here. She had a feeling she'd need her wits about her in order to deal with Striker.

She knew he was a Force Recon Marine, which meant he was a risk taker. An adrenaline junkie, like Ted.

Opponents who faced her in court called her Ice Queen because of her regal demeanor and distant manner. She used those tactics now, opening her eyes and facing Striker. "As I said, your grandfather's will states that you return and run King Oil for at least two months or else the entire company will be shut down. If you do return with me, the King fortune will be split equally among you and your four brothers. In addition, a sizable amount will be bestowed upon your mother."

Striker told himself he shouldn't have been surprised that, even in his death, Hank King was trying to force him into this idiotic plan.

But Striker still held the ace in the hole. Money had never been

important to his family. They'd managed okay without much of it. His mother believed that wealth had been a terrible burden and made Hank a bitter man.

"So King Oil is sold off." Striker said. "So what?"

"Perhaps I wasn't clear," Kate replied. "Everyone who works for King Oil will be out on the streets if you don't come back."

As if on cue, the Marine Corps' top brass, present but silent until now, explained their presence. General Hyett was their spokesman. "Top government officials are of the opinion that King Oil is too important to go under, that such a thing would make the economy unstable after the series of recent corporate bankruptcies. Therefore, it's in the country's best interest that Captain Kozlowski spend the two months at King Oil."

Striker had been trained to fight and rescue, to do whatever was necessary for his country's best interest. No doubt his grandfather had counted on that when devising his will.

"Sir, I feel compelled to point out that I know nothing whatsoever about the oil business or about business in general," Striker said.

"That doesn't matter," General Hyett replied. "All you have to do is show up and stand guard for two months, then you can return to your regular duties. Isn't that right, ma'am? You said that would meet the terms of the will."

"That's right."

"Good. Then it's agreed," the general stated. "Look on this as just another mission, Captain. I'm sure you'll complete it as

successfully as you have all the others."

Striker nodded curtly. He knew when he was beaten. "Thank you, sir."

"You and Ms. Bradley may use the conference room next door to work out the details," Commander Jenks told Striker. "That will be all. Dismissed."

Striker saluted before doing a precise about-face and heading for the door, which he held open for Kate. It wasn't until they were alone in the conference room that he displayed some of his pent-up frustration and anger.

"You and Hank had this all worked out, didn't you?" he growled.

"For your information, I told Hank that this wasn't a good idea," Kate replied in that highfalutin voice of hers.

"Bravo for you."

"He didn't listen to me."

"That's a pity."

"Look, I'm no happier about this state of affairs than you are."

"And why is that?"

"I've got better things to do with my time than deal with stubborn Marines who have a chip on their shoulder."

The woman clearly had an attitude problem. He knew why he was upset—he felt like his grandfather was still trying to control him even from beyond the grave. In addition, Striker had never done well dealing with the world of the rich and privileged.

He had his reasons, going all the way back to his time on

Hank's Westwind Ranch. That had been his mom's idea. Hank had convinced her during one of their rare phone conversations that "the boys" should have a choice, should see what they were missing. Hank could have suggested having them work the rigs out in the oil fields, but instead he'd been wily enough to suggest they visit the ranch.

Striker wondered if his mom had ever been afraid her sons might be wooed over to the dark side by the wealth and the power visible at Westwind. Or if she'd trusted them to stand by the ethics and values she'd instilled in them from birth.

Sure, money had been tight when he'd been growing up. But there had never been a lack of respect, love or laughter in their household.

The same could not be said about the domain of Hank and his "child" King Oil. In Hank's world, he was absolute ruler. If you weren't with him, then you were against him.

Which is why Striker had been so sure Hank had written him off. That and the fact that the old man had vowed to disown him the last time he'd seen him, after the disastrous nineteenth birthday party Hank had thrown for Striker. In fact, Hank had shouted the words, tossing the threat at him as if throwing hand grenades. His face had been taut with rage, his oversized fists clenched.

Not the picture of the loving grandfather. But there had been other moments, when Hank had taught Striker how to bait a hook and taken him fishing, that had given Striker hope that there

might have been a bond forged between them.

He'd never know now….

Striker turned off the memories and refocused his attention on Kate.

The bottom line was that this lady lawyer, with her fancy ways and arrogant assumptions that he'd obediently fall in with his grandfather's plans, represented that wealthy lifestyle—the one that Striker had so painfully collided with that summer.

Oh, yeah, he had plenty of reasons to be upset.

But he didn't know why she had eyed him so disapprovingly, calling him a stubborn Marine. Her voice had a new edge to it, an edge that got him wondering what her story was.

"How many Marines have you dealt with?" he asked.

"Not many," she admitted. "But I know your type."

"Really? And what type might that be, ma'am?" he drawled, noticing for the first time how lush her mouth was.

"The type that takes pleasure in living on the edge. The type that never feels more alive than when you're risking your life."

"Is that a crime?"

Kate wanted to answer that it should be. But that would mean revealing too much about her inner feelings, so she bit her tongue and stayed silent instead.

"How long were you Hank's attorney?" he demanded.

"Why do you care?" she countered.

"Just answer the question."

"Two years. Before that my father had been his attorney for

a number of years. But my father had a heart attack and was required to cut back his workload, so I took over several of his clients, including Mr. King."

Striker wondered what she was thinking, wondered what was going on behind those cool blue eyes of hers. He preferred doing that to dealing with his own torn emotions—the unexpected grief at knowing he was never going to make peace with his grandfather, the conflicting resentment toward the old man for manipulating him even from the grave.

He had to view this entire mess as if it were just another special op. Get in, accomplish the mission, get out.

But none of his missions had ever tugged at his emotions this way.

Sure, he'd been affected by some of the things he'd seen over the years. But you packaged it up, put it on the shelf and got on with the job.

Good advice. He needed to do that here.

Striker had a feeling that would not be easy in this case.

Not that Marines were into easy. No, difficult was their specialty. A good Marine loves a challenge. And Kate was certainly a challenge.

Under other circumstances he might even have enjoyed flirting with her. If she hadn't acted so icy and above him.

"I made our return travel arrangements before I left Texas," she said. "We're booked on a flight to San Antonio tonight."

Okay, this was another thing that aggravated him about her.

“Sure of yourself, aren’t you.”

Kate wished that was the case, but it wasn’t. Not at all. Striker could disrupt her normal calmness with remarkable ease. Which was why she’d wrapped her Ice Queen mantle around herself for protection. Who wouldn’t be rattled by coming face-to-face with the man who’d been the source of so many of her secret sexual fantasies, forbidden fantasies.

But there was more to it than that. So much more…

The bottom line was that Kate hadn’t anticipated this…thing…this physical thing that seemed to exist between them.

Just passing by him when he’d held the door open for her had made her heart beat twice as fast. Sitting at the large conference table with him now made her breath catch. And she had yet to even touch him. Not that she planned on doing that. But it was bound to happen at some point.

Maybe it would be best if she got it over with right now. Waiting for it only made things worse.

She dropped her pen, which obediently rolled across the table toward him. Striker picked it up, but instead of handing it over to her, he tossed it onto the yellow legal pad she’d taken out of her briefcase.

Was he deliberately avoiding touching her? Why?

She tried to imagine herself in his shoes—discovering that a member of her family had died, someone with whom she’d never made her peace. She’d be a wreck. She’d been a wreck when her father had had his heart attack two years ago.

But Striker was different. For one thing, he was a guy and guys dealt with these things differently. He was also a Marine, which no doubt meant he was even more disciplined about not showing any emotion.

Maybe she should be a little more understanding. “I’m sorry things have worked out this way, Striker.”

It was the first time she’d said his name and the sound of it on her lips made his heart unexpectedly clench. His strong reaction to her caught him by surprise. This particular female had a way of getting under his skin. Not a good sign. So he did what any good Marine would do. He fought back. “I don’t need your pity.”

She flinched as if he’d struck her. Great, now he had more guilt to add to the mess.

Concentrate on the mission, he grimly ordered himself. But it didn’t work. Not with her sitting so close that he could hear her breathe, could smell her rich perfume, could see the way her tongue darted out to nervously lick her lower lip.

He reached for the pitcher of cold water that stood in the center of the table. So did she. His hand covered hers. Her skin was so soft. He could feel her fingers tremble like soft butterflies against his callused palm.

Kate reminded herself about that old adage of being careful what you wished for. She’d wondered what touching him would be like. Now she knew. It was incredibly powerful.

Sexual awareness shot like a lightning bolt up her arm, infusing her entire body with hot restlessness and forbidden

thoughts.

No, she wasn't doing this. She wasn't getting involved. Not with Striker. No way, no how. He triggered memories much too painful to relive.

She slid her hand from his so suddenly the water pitcher almost tipped over.

Anger rushed over her, surprising her with its intensity. He was just a Marine, she bitterly reminded herself, another risk-taking adrenaline junkie who lived to cheat death. In the end, Striker and her former fiancé weren't that different after all. Except that Striker was still alive…and Ted wasn't.

There was no changing the past, but she wasn't going to make the same mistake twice. She was going to keep her relationship with Striker strictly professional—no matter what it took.

Chapter Two

Striker stood in the bedroom of his furnished rental apartment near the base, jamming a few of his belongings into his seabag with one hand while pressing the memory dial button on his cell phone with the other. Kate was waiting outside for him in a cab.

After years as a Force Recon Marine, Striker was well accustomed to deploying on a moment's notice. But he wasn't accustomed to doing so in regard to his family.

Fighting for freedom or justice was something he could manage. He didn't know how to manage telling his mom about his grandfather's death.

Striker considered telling his dad the news and having his dad tell his mom. But the bottom line was that Stan Kozlowski was no better at this kind of thing than Striker was. In fact, he may even have been worse.

"Hello?"

He smiled at the sound of his mother's soft-spoken voice. Many were deceived by her sweet demeanor, which camouflaged a will of steel. Angela King Kozlowski needed to be strong to be a Marine's wife, to marry him against her father's wishes and to raise five sons of her own. He and his brothers would walk on hot coals for her.

"Hello?" Angela repeated. "Is there anyone there?"

"Hey, Mom, it's Striker." He could hear the sound of the ocean

in the background. “Where are you?”

“Eating lunch along the Oregon coast. It’s really lovely out here, Striker. You should visit this area sometime.”

“Yeah, maybe I will.” He figured he’d stalled long enough. “Listen, Mom, I’ve got some bad news.”

“Is it your brothers? Are they okay?”

Striker cursed under his breath at the fear in his mother’s voice. He should have started differently. “No, it’s not my brothers. We’re all fine. It’s your father. I’m sorry, Mom, I just found out that he’s passed away. Heart attack. In his sleep, so he didn’t suffer.”

She was silent.

Striker swore silently. He shouldn’t have just spit it out like that. He should have worked up to it gently. Sure, his mother was a steel magnolia, but even she was bound to be upset by news like this. She might be strong, but she also had a softer side. “Mom, are you okay?”

“Yes,” she said quietly. “It’s just a surprise. Somehow I thought he’d always be down there in Texas, running King Oil.”

“Yeah, well, about King Oil…it seems that he didn’t disown us the way we thought.” He told her about the terms of the will as briefly as he could.

“I had no idea my father was planning something like this,” his mom said. “How do you feel about it all, Striker?”

“I’m ready to obey my orders.”

“Of course you are. But that wasn’t what I asked.”

Striker tossed in his shaving kit before closing his seabag. His mom wasn't just tough yet caring, she was also incredibly astute. She could probably sense that he was upset about this turn of events, despite his best efforts to hide that from her.

He loved his mom, but there was no way he was talking about his emotions with her. He hadn't done that since he was ten and he sure wasn't about to start now. "Listen, I've got to go, Mom. I'm sorry to be giving you such bad news about your father."

"What about the funeral? When will it be?"

"Funeral?" Striker repeated, not even having thought of that.

"He didn't want the fuss of a funeral," Kate said from behind him, startling him. "He had a private burial earlier this week."

Striker couldn't believe Kate had slipped past his customary awareness of his surroundings. As a Force Recon Marine, his very survival depended on him being able to keep his head at all times, in all circumstances.

He'd dealt with combat situations. He'd completed surgical strikes in the dead of night. He'd successfully executed search-and-destroy operations. So why was one rich blonde throwing him?

"Let me get back to you on that, Mom. We'll talk again soon." Jabbing the end call button, he tossed his phone aside to glare at Kate. "What are you doing in here?"

"I was wondering how much longer you'd be? Our flight leaves in two hours, we really should be at the airport right now."

"You've never heard of knocking before you enter a place?"

“I did knock, you didn’t answer. The door was ajar, so I came in.”

Leaving doors open? Striker never did that. Another sign that he didn’t have his head screwed on straight at the moment.

He narrowed his gaze on her, trying to figure out exactly what it was about her that was getting to him. She was pretty, but he’d dealt with pretty women before. Quite successfully.

She was classy and wealthy.

Okay, those were things he tended to avoid in his women.

Not that he went for trashy girls. But the ones born with a silver spoon in their mouths tended to hit him the wrong way. It didn’t take a psychiatrist to figure out why.

He’d turned nineteen during that summer he’d spent with his grandfather in Texas. His grandfather had thrown a big party, big in the way only Texans know how to accomplish. Wanting to show off, his grandfather had chosen a superexclusive country club as the location.

The entire thing had been a disaster as far as Striker was concerned. Not at first. At first, he’d been flattered by the attention of all the girls. What hormone-driven male of that age wouldn’t have been?

He’d been pursuing one girl in particular, Carolyn Sinclair, for weeks. Like Kate, she’d been a sexy blonde with long legs and a lot of class. He’d been dancing with her, real close, when his grandfather had stopped the music to make the announcement that Striker would be joining him at King Oil.

Striker had been stunned. He'd been upfront with his grandfather from the get-go. Striker was following in his father's proud footsteps and becoming a Marine. No way was he becoming an oilman.

To this day, Striker could still vividly remember the horrified look on everyone's face when he'd joined Hank at the podium only to contradict his grandfather's words. Striker had agreed to spend the summer to please his mother, he'd told the crowd, but his plans remained unchanged. Striker was joining the U.S. Marines.

The attitude of the crowd changed faster than a prairie fire with a tailwind.

The girls, with their big hair and even bigger bank accounts, had turned their backs on him. As for sweet Carolyn…well, she'd told him what a loser he was in no uncertain terms, throwing a hissy fit in front of everyone, shouting that the only reason she'd bothered to spend any time at all on a redneck like him was because of his grandfather's money. So much for her "classy" ways.

Yeah, it was safe to say that the entire thing had left a very bad taste in his mouth and the desire to distance himself entirely from rich chicks born with silver spoons in their mouths.

His gaze settled on Kate. Unfortunately there was no distancing himself from this rich chick. He was stuck with her.

Kate wondered what she'd done to aggravate Striker this time. He was staring at her with those intense green eyes of his. There

was no reading this guy's thoughts. He was a pro at disguising them. But the aggravation, that came through loud and clear.

She shifted her attention away from the brooding Marine and instead glanced around the studio apartment.

She suspected it was a furnished rental. Aside from a glimpse of a few brightly colored Hawaiian shirts hanging in the almost-empty closet, there was nothing much to give her any additional insight into Striker's character. The only personal items were two framed photos on the dresser. One looked to be of his family—his parents and brothers—and the other appeared to be a beach house of some kind.

The room was all done in monochromatic beiges, except for the bold Native American colors of the comforter on the neatly made bed. Her eyes remained on the bed while her mind wandered into forbidden territory.

Did Striker sleep on his back or on his side? Did he sleep in the nude? She imagined the sheet falling around his waist…

She reined in her wayward thoughts. Oh, no, she wasn't starting this again. Having fantasies about Striker. Absolutely not. This was where she'd gotten into trouble in the first place.

Closing her eyes, the memories came fast and hard. After mooning about Striker for most of the summer, four months later, on her eighteenth birthday in late December she'd delighted her parents by saying yes to golden-boy Ted Wentworth's marriage proposal. She and Ted had practically grown up together. Their parents were best friends and had made no secret

of their desire for their only children to join together in holy matrimony.

The only son of one of Texas's wealthiest families, Ted was two years older than Kate and an inveterate risk taker, participating in extreme sports like heli-snowboarding in the winter and race-car driving in the summer. But despite the fact that Ted was an adrenaline junkie, being with him had never made her heart beat wildly the way watching Striker had.

During her six-month engagement to Ted, Kate had tried to forget about Striker, who'd left Texas to join the Marines. But the fantasies she'd had that steamy summer had stubbornly remained fixed in her mind throughout the ensuing months, coming out at night to possess her dreams.

One recurring theme had her leaving Ted at the altar and running off with the sexy, rebellious Striker. Striker, who'd followed his dream of joining the Marines. Striker, who'd pleased himself instead of others.

Logically she'd told herself that Striker merely represented freedom.

Freedom was something she couldn't afford right now. Because whenever she tried to follow her dreams, disaster struck. People died.

So Kate had wrapped up all her dreams and put them away, focusing instead on stability. That was the thing she valued most these days.

She couldn't allow being with Striker to distract her from that

fact.

"We'd better get going," she said with chilly briskness, falling back into her Ice Queen persona. "We've got a plane to catch."

Striker had flown to war-torn countries faster than his trip to San Antonio. Everything that could have gone wrong did. Their flight was delayed umpteen times before being cancelled altogether. Bad weather was snarling up the entire system.

They were finally put on another flight and the plane actually left the gate, only to sit for another ninety minutes on the runway. By the time they'd arrived in San Antonio it was almost midnight. Luckily their luggage hadn't gotten messed up, but then he only had his carry-on seabag and Kate only had her briefcase and purse.

A company car was waiting for them. After scrunching his six-two body into a cramped airplane seat, Striker was infinitely glad for the limo with ample room.

He glanced over to where Kate had fallen asleep, her head resting on his shoulder. She'd taken some kind of travel sickness pills that had completely zonked her out. He'd barely gotten her into the limo before she was out again.

In fact, he'd been so concerned with keeping Kate upright and not sliding into a boneless heap on the sidewalk at the terminal, that he wasn't even sure where they were headed now.

But when the limo eventually turned off the main road onto a long one-lane drive, Striker knew. They were heading for Westwind, his grandfather's ranch.

Not his first choice, but at this point he was too tired to care. Besides, he had a bigger problem at the moment. Kate.

"How many of those pills did you take?" Striker muttered as Kate slid half-across his lap. His hand landed on her nylon-clad thigh.

His body reacted accordingly to the feel of a sexy woman strewn across it. He was still wearing his uniform, but that didn't stop his arousal from hardening beneath the placket of his khaki pants.

As the car rolled to a smooth stop, Striker had a decision to make. Leave an out-of-it Kate in the limo with directions for the driver to take her home—not that he knew where that was—or take her inside with him.

He carried her inside.

The white pillars standing guard on either side of the door made the place look more like the White House than a Western ranch. But then his grandfather always had been into power and the White House image evoked a lot of power.

The front door opened, and there stood ranch foreman Tony Martinez, his now-white, thick hair standing on end instead of smoothly slicked back as it had been the last time he'd seen him twelve years ago. His face reflected the outdoor life he led.

"Did we wake you, Tony? The fuzzy bunny slippers are a nice touch," Striker added, looking down.

Tony grinned sheepishly. "I forgot I was wearing them. It is good to see you again." Then he noticed the woman in Striker's

arms and his expression became concerned. “What happened?”

“Nothing a good night’s rest won’t cure,” Striker replied, moving past Tony to head for the grand staircase. “Kate took one of those motion sickness pills and it’s zonked her. Are the bedrooms still upstairs?”

Tony nodded and led the way. The expensive Oriental carpet runners softened the sound of Striker’s footsteps as he mounted the steps and efficiently made his way to the closest guest bedroom. There were five in the house.

After placing Kate on the bed, still without a word from her other than a ladylike sigh, Striker turned to Tony. “Is Maria still the housekeeper here?”

“No, her daughter Consuela is housekeeper now. But she’s not here today. She had to visit her mother in the hospital in Corpus Christi. That’s why I’m here in the house instead of over at the foreman’s place.”

“Are you the only one here?”

Tony nodded.

“We have to get her ready for bed,” Striker said with a nod down at Kate.

“Ready for bed? No, this is not something I do.” Tony hurriedly backed out of the room. “I will see you downstairs.” He paused on the threshold before turning back to narrow his dark eyes at Striker. “I can trust you to behave as a gentleman, si? Not to take advantage of Señorita Kate?”

“You can trust me, Tony.”

The foreman nodded briskly. “Bueno.”

A second later, Striker was alone in the softly lit bedroom with Kate.

Plan, prepare, execute. These were the steps a Marine took to accomplish his mission.

Tonight Striker’s mission was to prepare Kate for bed. Which meant removing her shoes.

Check.

What about nylons?

He needed more information. If they were pantyhose…

They weren’t.

Okay, then. Speedy decision making was one of the signs of a good Marine, and Striker was a very good Marine.

Removing nylons.

Check.

It was getting hotter than a tropical jungle in here. That’s why his fingers trembled slightly after he peeled the sheer nylons off her long legs.

Kate mumbled and nearly poked his eye out with her knee as she rolled onto her side.

Now the curve of her hip drew his attention. So did her bare thighs, exposed by the hiked-up hem of her skirt. He knew firsthand how incredibly soft her skin was.

He shifted his attention to a less provocative area.

He probably should remove her suit jacket. Striker undid the first two buttons, not knowing what he’d find beneath. What he

found was a lacy black bra that made his heart stop.

The temperature in the room rose another twenty degrees. The last button on the jacket was proving to be especially stubborn. The backs of his fingers brushed against her breast as he struggled—struggled to breathe.

She cuddled closer.

His breathing stopped. His body throbbed.

He got the last button undone and temporarily retreated.

Okay, he had to be fast about this, because drawing things out was only prolonging the sexual torture.

Jacket and then skirt removed efficiently.

Check.

She was wearing a slip. Black like her bra.

Fine, she could keep wearing it.

Because he'd had enough for one evening.

Striker grabbed a comforter from the chest at the foot of the bed and covered her with it, from chin to toe. Then he hightailed it out of the room.

He was greeted by Tony at the foot of the stairs.

"Señorita Kate is okay?"

Striker nodded. "Yeah, she'll be fine. She took some new kind of travel sickness pill that knocked her out. She'll be fine," he repeated. Striker wasn't so sure about himself, however. His body still ached. What kind of pervert was he to get so aroused over an unconscious woman's half-naked body?

Yeah, well, Striker had never claimed to be a saint.

He deliberately focused his attention on the ranch foreman. “Like I said before, Tony, those are mighty nice slippers.”

“They are a gift from my granddaughter. They keep my poor feet warm.”

“Your feet warm? It’s early September. The average temperature down here this time of year is in the mid-eighties.” Or so he’d discovered when surfing the Internet for information on King Oil and San Antonio while waiting for their flight to board. Kate wasn’t the only one who knew how to use a laptop. He’d tossed his into his seabag at the last minute.

“It’s cooler at night.” Tony’s expression turned stubborn.

“Yeah, when it gets down to seventy. Big deal.”

Tony waved his words away. “You don’t have grandchildren, so you don’t understand.”

“How many do you have now?” Striker asked.

“Six.”

Normally Striker wasn’t the kind to make small talk, but it prevented him from dealing with other stuff—like the fact that Kate turned him on.

His gaze settled on the foyer, where a large portrait of his grandfather hung. Hank King gazed out at the world as if daring anyone to mess with him.

Regrets washed over Striker—regret that time had run out, that he and his grandfather had never made peace, that his grandfather was no longer with them. True, he hadn’t agreed with the old man, but he had never wanted him dead.

Unable to breathe, Striker quickly moved out the French doors to the patio that ran along the back of the house. The lights illuminating the large swimming pool couldn't compete with the sparkle of stars above. He'd traveled around the world but had always remembered the night sky here at the ranch as being something special.

"I didn't think you'd come back," Tony admitted.

"Believe me, it wasn't my idea."

"I know. It was your grandfather's idea. That's why I didn't think you'd come."

"I'm just following orders. The Marine Corps's orders, not my grandfather's orders."

"In this case, they are one and the same, si?"

Striker nodded. He'd had always known that this wasn't the life for him, that he'd have no freedom with his dictatorial grandfather calling all the shots. Yet here he was, doing what his grandfather wanted and returning to Texas.

At times like this Striker was convinced Fate was a female, and that she was laughing her head off at this Force Recon Marine.

Chapter Three

"This is a surprise," Kate's father noted as he looked at her over the top of the morning paper. This morning, as he did every morning, Jack Bradley was eating breakfast in the formal dining room with its sumptuous red walls and gilded mirror. Her mother had one of San Antonio's best interior decorators design the area to her specifications—which were rich and richer. "I thought you were still in Washington."

"I got back late last night. Is that coffee?" Kate slid into a chair and reached for the thermal carafe. She'd walked the mile between Westwind and her parents' place. Her Italian shoes would never be the same again.

"Of course it's coffee," he replied. "What else would I be drinking in the morning?"

"Decaf?"

"Yes, unfortunately. Doctor's orders."

"When is your next appointment with your heart doctor?"

"You sound like your mother." He eyed her critically. "I must say you're looking rather rumpled this morning."

Kate wasn't about to tell him that that was because she'd spent the night next door. "I ended up on a redeye flight last night. I didn't plan it that way, but we kept running into flight delays…"

"By your use of the term we I'm assuming that you brought Hank's grandson back with you?"

“His name is Striker, and I didn’t bring him with me, he came with me. He’s a Marine and they don’t take kindly to being brought anywhere.”

“Because he’s a Marine, I would assume he’d be accustomed to taking orders,” her father said, crisply folding the newspaper in half and setting it on the table. “Did he give you any problems?”

Plenty of them, she thought, but they were not the type that she could talk about with her father.

Kate still wasn’t sure how she ended up in the guest bedroom with half her clothes undone. She prayed that the housekeeper had put her to bed, but she had a vague recollection of turning over and seeing Striker looming above her.

Maybe that had been a dream. Surely, he wouldn’t take off her clothes?

What was she thinking? Of course he’d take off her clothes. He was a guy, wasn’t he?

But he was a Marine. Weren’t they supposed to have a higher code of honor or something?

Which meant that if he did undo some of her clothing, he would have done so with his eyes closed.

Yeah, right.

“Well?” her father prompted her. “Were there problems?”

“Nothing I can’t manage.”

“I certainly hope that’s the case.” Her father didn’t sound very confident of her competency. But then that was vintage Jack Bradley. No one could meet the high standards he set, not only

for others but for himself as well. “I don’t understand why Hank insisted that you handle this matter yourself.”

“Because he had faith in my abilities.”

Jack picked up a dry piece of toast, glared at it and then tossed it back on the plate. “I should be the one handling his estate.”

“You already have more than enough work to deal with,” Kate reminded him. “The doctor told you that you had to cut back on the number of hours you spend at the office.”

“And I’ve done that.”

“I know you have. Honestly, I can handle things with the King estate. You don’t have to worry about a thing.”

“Hmm.” He made his customary noncommittal murmur which really meant I don’t buy that for one minute.

“Kate!” Her mother’s voice sounded horrified as she entered the room with her customary elegance. Even this early in the morning Elizabeth Hunter Bradley was the epitome of good grooming, wearing silk pants the color of café au lait along with a designer paisley blouse in swirls of browns. As a former Miss Texas she took great pride in her looks, and took great care to maintain them. “You look like something the cat dragged in.”

“We don’t have a cat,” Kate replied, rather pleased at how calm she sounded given the fact that her stomach was in knots. Kate may have inherited her mother’s blond hair and blue eyes, but she lacked her mother’s innate ability to achieve perfection.

“You know very well what I mean.” Now her mother sounded irritated. “What on earth happened to you? You look as if you’ve

slept in that suit."

"She had a bad flight in from Washington," her father replied on her behalf.

"What is she doing here at this time in the morning?" Her mother poured herself a cup of coffee. "Shouldn't she be getting ready for work?"

"I'm right here," Kate reminded her parents. "I can hear you talking about me."

"Then answer the question," her mother said.

"I'm hoping Dad can give me a ride into the city this morning," Kate said.

"Why do you need a ride?" her mother asked.

"Because my car is still at my condo. So are my clothes."

"And why aren't you there?" Her mother continued the inquisition.

"Because the limo from the airport dropped me off out here." Kate was not about to admit that she'd spent the night at Hank's ranch with Striker, that he'd possibly put her to bed, removing half her clothes. Let her parents think she'd just gotten in from the airport.

"Dropped you off out here? Why would the driver do that?" her mother said.

"There was a mix-up. Oh, my, look at the time." Kate made a big deal of tapping her fourteen-karat gold watch, a present from her father. "We'd better be going, Dad."

"Right."

Thankfully her father only talked about business during the drive into the city where he'd agreed to drop her off at her condo. He made no further reference to Striker.

That didn't mean Kate wasn't thinking about Striker, however. And wondering if she'd only dreamt the magic of his touch on her breasts last night….

"May I help you, sir?" The woman behind the reception desk on the top floor of King Oil's headquarters eyed him warily.

Striker couldn't blame her. He knew he looked out of place. He didn't own a suit, not that he'd wear one if he could at all avoid it.

And he wasn't sure of Marine procedure for wearing his uniform in this case. Sure he was here as a result of his commanding officer's request that he do so. But did this really qualify as Marine business?

He'd settled for jeans and a denim shirt. Standard attire in Texas. But not, apparently, on the executive floor of King Oil's headquarters, if the receptionist's frown was any gauge.

"Good morning, ma'am." He flashed his best smile at the suspicious receptionist. "I'm Striker Kozlowski."

"Oh, Mr. King's grandson. I'm so sorry, sir! I didn't know it was you." The woman was practically trembling in her shoes.

"No problem," he assured her as she ushered him in past the frosted glass doors that led to the executive offices.

Striker remembered visiting King Oil's San Antonio headquarters the one summer he'd spent with his grandfather

before joining the Marines. He never thought he'd set foot in this place again.

Midland or Houston were the more customary locations for an oilman's headquarters, but then his grandfather had never been one to follow the crowd. He'd taken a shine to San Antonio and had decided to set up business there. End of story. Or the beginning of it.

His grandfather's office suite was at the end of the wide hall. A massive desk stood guard outside the inner sanctum. He paused several feet away to assess the situation…and to appreciate the young woman standing beside the desk. She could have been a lingerie model. She was petite and busty with long red hair that reached halfway down her back. Her short skirt showed plenty of leg.

For the first time since this thing had started, Striker felt optimistic. Maybe this mission wouldn't be so difficult after all.

The metal nameplate on her desk said she was Tex Murphy.

She didn't look like a Tex to him, but he didn't really care what her name was. He was just standing there enjoying the view when he heard Kate's voice by his side. "Good morning, Striker."

"Yes, it is," he agreed, keeping his eyes on sexy Tex. "Was Tex Murphy my grandfather's assistant?"

"Yes. She'll be your assistant, as well."

"Great."

"But that's not Tex," Kate informed him.

"What do you mean?"

“I mean the young woman you’re drooling over is not Tex Murphy.”

“Marines do not drool,” Striker stated, swiveling his gaze to Kate.

“Right.”

“You, standing over there by Kate, state your business,” a grouchy, gravelly voice demanded.

Striker’s dreams of being pampered by the sexy redhead dissolved. “Let me guess. That’s Tex.”

“Yes, it is,” Kate said cheerfully.

There’s no way anyone would mistake Tex for a lingerie model. She did have a lot in common with a drill sergeant, however, including the voice. She was a petite little thing, but she had the bearing of a general. Her short hair was gun-metal gray and her light blue eyes reflected her dissatisfaction.

“Is she always this grouchy or is she just not a morning person?” Striker asked.

“Tex is always this way,” Kate replied with a smile that told him she was taking great satisfaction in this.

“Great.”

“Don’t tell me a big bad Marine like you is afraid of a spitfire like Tex?”

“Marines are never afraid,” he stated.

“I’m glad to hear that.”

Striker decided she was having entirely too much fun at his expense. Time to turn the tables on her. “So where did you

disappear to this morning?"

"This is not the time to discuss that," she noted with a meaningful look in Tex's direction.

"Don't tell me a big bad attorney like you is afraid of a spitfire like Tex?" he mocked her.

"Tex has ears and eyes in the back of her head," Kate muttered.

"I heard that," Tex growled. "So you two might as well get yourselves on over here and talk to me directly instead of behind my back."

"Yes, ma'am." Striker said before flashing her a grin. "Striker Kozlowski at your service, ma'am."

"I sincerely doubt that," Tex retorted.

"Doubt what? That I'm Striker?"

"That you're at my service. That you're up to no good, now that I'd believe."

"Ma'am I'm just here to…" To what? He regrouped. "To assess the situation."

"I can tell you the situation. Your grandfather, God bless his soul, has cashed in his chips and departed this earth. For some reason he saw fit to complicate all our lives by demanding that you, a Marine, spend time pretending to be an oilman in charge of a huge company. Luckily you've got me to help you."

"I'm sure you'll be an invaluable asset, ma'am," Striker noted solemnly.

Her narrow gaze was filled with suspicion. "I hope you're not

fixin' to be messin' with my routine around here."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Striker assured her.

"I hope you are fixin' to be messin' with some other folks' routines. They won't take kindly to that, an outsider like you comin' in here and messin' with things." She gave him an assessing head-to-toe look. "But then you don't appear to be the sort of man to walk away from a fight."

"I'm a Marine, ma'am. We don't walk away from fights."

"And they're never afraid," Kate added with a grin. "He already told me that much."

"Anything else I should know about Marines?" Tex demanded.

"Plenty, but we don't have to go into all the details this morning."

"Just remember you're in Texas now."

"Hard to forget that, ma'am," Striker noted with a nod toward the huge map of the state on one wall.

"And Texans are different."

"By different, she means better," Kate said.

"Shoot, I would have thought that much was obvious." Tex said.

"I can't work here," Striker growled in frustration an hour later. He stood in his grandfather's office. Before him were the floor-to-ceiling windows offering a great view of the skyline. The San Antonio River with its well-known River Walk meandered through the city while the Alamo rested in solitude to one side.

Striker felt like those men stuck in the Alamo, fighting against incredible odds. Not only was Kate inundating him with information about the company, but he was surrounded by the presence of his grandfather.

The walls were filled with photos of Hank standing beside former and present leaders of the free world. A pair of bronzes by some famous Western artist, Kate had told him the name but he'd forgotten, were on either side of a dark green leather couch that would have seated five comfortably.

There were no photos of family on Hank's desk or anywhere in the office. No personal items. Only indicators of power. And a mural of oil rigs painted on the far wall that had at its core a saying by fellow oilman John Paul Getty— "Success: Rise early, work hard, strike oil."

Striker supposed Hank had done all that. But what did he really know of his grandfather? There were few clues here.

Pausing at the desk, Striker reached out to touch the fountain pen sitting there. This he did remember. Hank had never liked ball-point pens. He'd been old-fashioned in his preference for fountain pens. And for baiting his hooks with handmade lures he'd devised himself.

It was as if everything had been left just as it was, waiting for Hank to return. Only he wasn't returning.

Striker wasn't listening to a word Kate was saying, and he needed to. This was important. He needed to be successful in this mission. But to do so, he had to make some changes.

Striker strode to the door and called out to Tex. “I need a conference room to set up my ops H.Q.”

“You want to speak English?” Tex said.

“A conference room. To set up my operational headquarters.”

“What are you fixin’ to operate on?”

“This company.”

“There’s a meeting room down the hall to the right.”

“Affirmative.” He resorted to his military language. It made him feel more in control.

Ten minutes later he and Kate were seated in a small conference room.

“Don’t you think you’re being a little ridiculous by refusing to use your grandfather’s office?” Kate said.

“Ridiculous?”

The tone of his voice should have warned her that she was entering dangerous waters, but it was too late now. “I just meant that it would be simpler to review the company’s status in his office where we would have easy access to files.”

“Marines aren’t into easy.”

“I’m learning that.”

“This laptop computer is supposed to be able to access any information I need, so what’s the problem?”

The problem was proximity. Unlike yesterday when she and Striker had sat across from one another at a conference table, today she had to sit beside him to show him how to use the spreadsheets displayed on the laptop computer.

The conference room he'd chosen was one of the smallest on this floor. Her shoulder kept bumping against his, her arm warmed by his body heat.

He was wearing jeans today, which reminded her of those times she'd seen him wearing jeans—and nothing else—that summer.

Or there was that first time, when he'd been skinny-dipping down by the pond. Wearing nothing at all.

She really had to get a grip here. She couldn't keep allowing her thoughts to stray. They were discussing important topics, subjects that affected the livelihood and well-being of hundreds of people.

What had they been talking about before she'd gone off the deep end? Oh, yes. Striker had asked her if there was a problem using the laptop computer.

"No problem," she belatedly replied. Which was a total lie of course. There were problems galore. Like her inability to keep her mind on business. Or the fact that Striker was getting more irritable by the minute.

"Who was that sexy redhead?" he asked out of the blue.

"Pardon me?" Kate blinked at him. Here she was having fantasies about Striker and he was interested in a redhead?

"That sexy redhead who was seated at Tex's desk earlier. Who is she?"

"Tex's granddaughter. I wouldn't recommend messing with her. Tex is very protective of her family."

“What makes you think I’d do anything Tex wouldn’t approve of?”

“Experience.”

“You don’t have much experience with me.”

True, but what experience she had had was definitely memorable. Except for her losing her clothing last night. That part was still hazy.

“Did you undress me last night?” she demanded abruptly.

“Define undress.”

“Don’t dance around the question.”

“Marines don’t dance around questions.”

“Fine, then answer it. Was Consuela the one who put me to bed last night?”

“I carried you upstairs to the bedroom, not Con-suela.”

“But then Consuela came and took things from there, right?” Kate said hopefully.

“No, ma’am. Consuela was in Corpus Christi last night visiting her mom. That left Tony and me.”

“So you were the one who undressed me?”

“What makes you think it wasn’t Tony?” Striker countered.

“He’s too much of a gentleman.”

“I thought I was being a gentleman by making you more comfortable.”

“You thought wrong.”

“Not a surprise. You always seem to think I’m doing the wrong thing. You’ve acted that way from the second you walked into

my C.O.'s office in Quantico."

"Me? You're the one who isn't the happy camper, the one who made it clear that you didn't want to leave the Marines to come down here, that you think this entire idea is worthless. And now you throw a hissy fit and won't even work in your grandfather's office."

"Marines do not have hissy fits!" Striker growled.

"I wouldn't have minded if being surrounded by your grandfather's things was making you remember him too vividly and causing your grief to overwhelm you. But I doubt that was the case. You haven't shown the least bit of emotion about Hank's death. He was a good man."

"He was a dictatorial control freak calling all the shots."

"How dare you insult him now that he isn't here to defend himself!"

"Listen, you know nothing about me or how I feel so don't go thinking you're suddenly an expert on what I'm thinking. And don't go singing his praises to me. He turned his back on my mother when she needed him most. She was struggling with kids to raise. Money was tight, Marines don't make much, but Hank wouldn't lift a finger to help her out. He made things rough for her when he could have made them easier." There, the words were finally out.

Instead of agreeing with him, Kate asked, "Did she ever ask him for help?"

"Of course not."

“Well, then how could he know she’d need it?”

Her answer infuriated him. She sat there so cool and calm, so distant on her pedestal where she remained untouched by worries about making a paycheck stretch. “There’s no talking to you!” He turned the swiveling conference chair to glare at her.

She did the same, moving her chair to glare at him, not backing down one inch. “Me? I’m not the one with issues. You are.”

“You don’t know what you’re talking about.” Striker didn’t realize how close they were until he felt her sweet breath bouncing off his lips. He saw the emotion flaring in her eyes—anger followed by sudden awareness.

It was too late to retreat, too late to think. Striker could only act, leaning forward just enough to capture her wayward mouth with his own.

Chapter Four

Kate hadn't expected Striker to kiss her. She didn't have time to prepare her defenses before he was already storming them.

His approach was forceful but not in a frightening way. What was scary was the way he made her feel—all hot and shivery deep inside.

The warm pressure of his mouth tantalized her, tempted her, overwhelmed her. The gentle brush of his fingertips against her jawline was at odds with the masterful way he consumed her, arousing a passion within her that had lain buried since Ted's death.

But even Ted had never created this kind of response in her.

Striker claimed her mouth as if exploring for riches. Her lips parted willingly, allowing his tongue to slip inside and flick inquiringly with a sensuality that drove her wild.

French kissing. She'd never understood the appeal before. Now she could. Oh yes, yes!

Her lips opened even farther under his expert tutelage, following his lead, matching his demands.

She felt the thud of his heart beneath her hand, could feel the softness of his denim shirt beneath her fingertips and the warmth of his skin beneath. She was on fire, passion throbbing through her entire body.

Her knees went weak, making her melt against him. Sexual

need pooled in all the feminine places in her body—her breasts, her pelvis—both of which were pressed tightly against his fully aroused hard body.

Out of control. She was completely out of control. And out of her league. Ted may have been a risk taker but he'd never made her feel as if she'd stepped off a plane without a parachute. He'd never made her feel reckless.

This had to stop. She had to stop. But it felt so good. Dangerously good.

Remember what happens whenever you go after what you want.

The thought shot through her mind, shattering the haze of pleasure like a hammer shattering glass.

A second later the kiss was over—she and Striker breaking it off at the same time.

Striker took several steps away from her. He hadn't expected Kate to respond the way she had—to melt in his arms, to part her lips and grant him entry. Her passion threw him. Then he remembered the last time a ritzy female had kissed him as if she'd meant it…only to later inform him that it was all an act. Carolyn Sinclair. His nineteenth birthday.

Sure, that had been a long time ago, but some things a guy didn't forget.

And yeah, he'd kissed plenty of women since then. But none of them born with a spoon in their mouth the way Kate had been. They tended not to have any interest in a Force Recon Marine.

He'd seen the type in Washington, D.C. They had dollar signs in their eyes. The size of a guy's bank account was the most important thing to them.

So why would a wealthy lady lawyer like Kate go all hot on him?

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