



Mountain Retreat (Harlequin Intrigue Series)

By Cassie Miles

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Editorial Review

About the Author

USA TODAY bestselling author Cassie Miles lives in Colorado. After raising two daughters and cooking tons of macaroni and cheese for her family, Cassie is trying to be more adventurous in her culinary efforts. She's discovered that almost anything tastes better with wine. When she's not plotting Harlequin Intrigue books, Cassie likes to hang out at the Denver Botanical Gardens near her high-rise home.

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Working as a barmaid at the Silver Star Saloon in Austin put Sidney Parker's eidetic memory to good use. She could easily remember the drink orders for this table of twelve. With thumbs hooked in the belt loops of her thigh-high jean skirt, she faced the group of well-dressed young people who were still wearing their security badges from the state capitol.

"What'll it be?" she asked.

They could have answered in one voice: beer. But the Silver Star was a designer brewery with products ranging from Amber Angel to Zoo Brew. Sidney mentally recorded the order and gave a nod.

"Wait a minute," said a woman with platinum blond curls. "Change mine from Chantilly Lace to Raspberry Rocket."

"Got it."

"Are you sure? You didn't write anything down."

Sidney inhaled a breath and repeated their order. "We're starting over here with two Pale Tigers, then a Blue Moon, a Lucky Ducky, Thor's Hammer Lite..." She continued around the table and ended with the redhead. "And you'll be having the Raspberry Rocket."

The gang applauded, and she swept a bow before heading to the huge central bar to fill her tray.

Keeping her brain occupied wasn't the greatest benefit of Sidney's part-time night job. The country-and-western sound track, the conversation and general clamor at the Silver Star provided her with a much-needed distraction during those lonely hours before dawn when tears swamped her pillow.

Behind the bar, Celia Marshall ducked down so the customers couldn't see her adjust the red gingham uniform shirt to better contain her cleavage. "I swear, I'm about to have a wardrobe malfunction."

"That's a problem I don't have." Sidney never needed to worry about her cup running over; her breasts were small and well behaved.

"I'd trade my chest in a minute for your mile-long legs."

"No deal." Sidney liked being tall. In her cowgirl boots, she was almost six feet. She gave her friend a closer look and noticed the puffiness around her eyes. "Something wrong?"

"Ray and I are fussing at each other again." Celia shook her head and frowned. "I always feel like a class-A whiner talking to you about man problems. Nobody has worse luck than you."

"It's not a contest." Sidney tucked a strand of her long, straight blond hair behind her ear. "And there's nothing I can do about my situation. You have options."

"Any word on Nick?"

"Not yet." She couldn't bear to think of Nick Corelli, her fiance. The mere mention of his name conjured up a mental image of a tall, handsome marine with thick black hair and deep-set eyes the color of fine cognac. Her perfect memory filled in all the blanks as she recalled his wide grin, high cheekbones and strong jawline.

If she allowed herself to think about him, she'd be sobbing in a minute. So she pushed his image aside and asked, "What's up with you and Ray?"

"It's all about his stupid hunting plans."

Sidney listened while she loaded her tray. It was going to take a couple of trips to serve her big table, and the domestic drama of Celia and Ray gave her something else to think about. They were both good people, understandable people with normal relationship issues. Not like her and Nick.

As she stood behind the bar, she spotted two men with impeccable posture and serious expressions enter the saloon. They weren't in uniform, but they might as well have been marching shoulder to shoulder, wearing their marine dress blues.

She set her tray on the bar. "Celia, you'll have to take over for me."

After a quick explanation to the shift manager, she fell into step between the two marines. She knew the drill. They were here to escort her to an interview with a CIA agent or someone high up in Marine Intelligence. She'd taken part in sixteen of these interrogations during the past six months after her fiance went missing in a South American dictatorship. She always hoped that her marine escorts would be bringing good news.

They never did.

In a dull beige room at the local CIA field offices, Sidney paced back and forth behind the table. The heels of her boots clunked on the tile floor. In her barmaid uniform with the short denim skirt and gingham top, she felt a little ridiculous but not intimidated.

The first time she'd been sequestered in a room like this, her anxiety level was off the charts. The shock of possibly losing Nick had been staggering, and she'd been desperate for information. She'd begged, wept and pleaded.

The only facts she'd been able to pry from the case officer, CIA Special Agent Sean Phillips, were that her fiance was MIA in the South American country of Ti-quanna, his body hadn't been found and he was probably being held by the rebels. There had been no ransom demands.

That was in early May, six months and four days ago. Nothing much had changed in the details she'd been given, but her attitude had transformed. When she first came here, she was a nervous kitty cat. Now, a lioness.

She was half a tick away from going to Tiquanna herself, marching into the palace compound of dictator Tomas Hurtado and demanding an army to storm the rebel camps. She'd met Hurtado three years ago when he consulted with the oil company she worked for in the engineering department. Along with her boss at Texas Triton, she had actually traveled to the small country that was intent on developing its natural resources.

Sometimes, she wondered if that trip was the reason Nick had been selected for the assignment. When he told her that his platoon was being sent to Tiquanna, she'd given him all the inside information on Hurtado and his stunning wife, Elena.

The door opened and Special Agent Phillips entered. Sidney had heard that CIA agents liked to look anonymous so they could fade into crowds. If true, that meant Phillips was a CIA superstar. He was the most average-looking guy she'd ever met. With his thinning brown hair, brown eyes and average build, he was as plain as a prairie chicken.

"Why am I here?" she asked.

"Nice to see you, Sidney."

"Do you have news?"

A second person entered the room. Special Agent Victoria Hawthorne was higher in rank than Phillips, always dressed in black and as thin as a greyhound. Her dark hair was slicked back in a tight bun. She pulled out a chair on the opposite side of the table and sat. "Have a seat, Sidney."

"Am I being interrogated?" Still standing, she purposely kept her anger going. "This looks like an interrogation room with the closed door and the table and the big two-way mirror on the wall."

Special Agent Hawthorne scowled. Her thin lips pulled into an upside-down U. "You've been in this room before."

"And I've answered a million questions," she said. "I've been totally cooperative, and I think it's time I got an upgrade to a comfortable chair and, maybe, a room with windows."

Ignoring Sidney's demands, she asked, "Have you been in contact with anyone from Tiquanna?"

"Of course not. If somebody contacted me, I'd tell you immediately."

Hawthorne regarded Sidney through slitted eyes. "I have information if you're ready to hear it."

Hope flickered inside her like a pilot light that refused to be extinguished. "I'm ready. Tell me."

"On one condition. You must promise not to act on this information. Trust us to do our jobs without your interference. Is that clear?"

"Crystal."

"Hurtado and his wife will be in Austin next week along with several other South American leaders." This was big news. Sidney might have a chance to hear firsthand what was happening to Nick. "I want to see

them."

"I can't promise," the thin-lipped agent said. "We'll do everything in our power to make that happen."

"Where will they be staying? How long will they be here?"

"You don't need to know." As she rose from her chair, Special Agent Hawthorne maintained steady eye contact. Her gaze was a warning. "If they agree to meet with you, we'll be in touch."

She turned on her heel and stalked from the room, leaving Sidney with a complicated tangle of anger, frustration and fear. She was afraid to expect too much, but she couldn't give up. It would be foolish to antagonize Hawthorne, but Sidney's anger demanded release.

Special Agent Phillips took Hawthorne's seat at the table, opened a folder and took out four photographs of men in camouflage fatigues. Three of them had beards. "Recognize anyone?"

"Do you think she'll let me talk to Hurtado?"

"I can't rightly say," he said in a Texan drawl.

Over the months, she and Phillips had developed a bit of rapport. He'd seen her at her worst when she broke down into hysterical tears, and she sensed that he was more sympathetic toward her than the other agents.

"I could negotiate with the rebels," she said. "I know it's against CIA policy, but I could—"

"C'mon now, Sidney girl." He poked at the photos.

"Let's do this thing."

She didn't want to be a good girl. A lioness would tear these photos to scraps and throw them in his face. She was too docile. Nothing was getting done.

But what choice did she have? Could she single-handedly take on the whole intelligence community?

She huffed a frustrated sigh before picking up the photos. This was part of their routine. Because of her memory, the CIA used her to identify men whom she might have met when she visited the country. Thus far, there had been only four familiar faces.

These unposed pictures had been taken in a forested setting. "It's hard to tell with the beards. I don't think I know them. Who are they?"

"Rebels," he said.

"When I was in Tiquanna, I never left the palace grounds. Why would you think I'd know rebels?" She didn't expect him to answer. "Is it because the palace guards are defecting? Are they joining the rebels?"

"Let's just say that Senor Hurtado ain't exactly winning any popularity contests."

And the CIA wanted to keep Hurtado on their side. Though the dictator had a terrible record on civil rights

for his impoverished people, he supported US programs and happily accepted our aid. More important, he was working with neighboring countries to form an oil and natural gas distribution system functioning with US companies.

When Phillips pulled out several aerial photographs of the palace grounds, she groaned. "Not again," she said. "I've told you everything I could about the palace."

"Focus on this area." He pointed to a far corner in the walled compound.

She stared. "It looks like the wall is broken. Was it an explosion?"

"Yep."

A wave of guilt washed over her. In a similar tactic, Nick had disappeared. Six months and four days ago, there had been an explosion targeting the front gates. Two marines had been injured. The last anyone had seen of Nick was when he was trying to rescue them.

Before he left on this deployment, she'd told him not to be a hero, which was impossible advice for a marine. The man lived to protect others. His courage was as much a part of him as his arms and legs. Oh, God, she missed him so much. Without him, her life was empty.

Her fingers gripped the back of the chair. Her knees were weak. Though she wanted to be fierce, the weight of her sadness dragged her down. She sank into the chair.

"Please," she said, "you've got to tell me something about Nick. Those pictures you showed me are snapshots. They were taken from surveillance at the rebel camp, weren't they? Your people have infiltrated the camp."

The corner of his mouth twitched. For Phillips, that slight change of expression was more than she'd seen from him in weeks. Sensing a possible crack in the stone wall that kept information from her, she asked, "Do you have photos of Nick?"

"You know how this works, Sidney. I'm here to get intel from you."

"I just want to know if he's all right."

"There's reason to believe that your fiance is well."

The tiny flicker of hope burst into full flame. Something was different about Phillips. He knew something.

She asked, "Is Nick well enough to be rescued? What do you CIA people call it? Extracted. Can he be extracted?"

He pushed the aerial photo toward her. "We need to know about this part of the compound."

There was nothing to tell. She hadn't visited that part of the palace grounds, hadn't noticed anything about the far corner. For the first time, she wondered if it would serve her better to lie and build up the importance of that corner in the hope that she could get more information. But she wasn't about to play games with the CIA. They were on the same side. She needed to cooperate.

"I was never near that part of the grounds." She rose from her chair. "I've got nothing against you, Phillips. But I need more. Is there anybody else I should talk to? Anything else I can do?"

He leaned back in the chair and folded his arms across his chest. "If you left the room right now and went down the corridor to your left, I wouldn't stop you."

"Why? What does that mean?"

"You heard me."

She took the cue, not knowing what she'd find. Hoping for the best and fearing the worst, her fingers closed on the doorknob and she yanked the door open. Had it always been unlocked? She didn't know; she'd never tried it before.

After hours, there was no one else in the hallway. One side was all windows, and the other was closed doors. The route she'd always followed when escorted into the building was in the opposite direction. She'd never been this way before.

Moving fast before Phillips changed his mind, she rushed down the carpeted corridor. At the far end, a double doorway opened into a honeycomb of cubicles encircled by offices with glass walls. She heard voices to her left and turned.

In the farthest office, Special Agent Hawthorne stood behind a desk and spoke to four men. One stood apart from the others. His left hand was in the pocket of his gray suit jacket. He was tall with black hair and wide shoulders. Sidney couldn't see his face, but she knew him.

Users Review

From reader reviews:

Cheri Whaley:

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