

## **Red Heat**

*L.M. Connolly*

Of all the hotels in New York, she had to walk into his.

After Chase's beloved Jillian dies in a car wreck, he uses her name as a code for the STORM agents who use his luxury hotel. When a woman registers as Jillian Miller, he assumes it is business as usual. But it's not. The woman he believed dead has come back.

Jillian's mission for the IRDC, enemy to all Talents, shouldn't include wild days and steamy nights but Chase's hot, powerful body drives her crazy. Torn between her mission and her craving for Chase, Jillian doesn't know which side she's on anymore.

To save both their lives, Chase must restore the gaps in Jillian's memory. He uses their shared past, including her passion for public sex, to bring her back to him. If she doesn't remember soon, she'll die. And he won't let her die alone.

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## *Red Heat*

L.M. Connolly

### Chapter One

Caroline's heart pounded double time as she stepped through the huge glass doors of the New York flagship hotel of the Timothy group. Not for the first time she doubted she could accomplish her mission but she'd rehearsed this part so many times, she could have done it in her sleep.

One of the premier hotels in New York, the Timothy was imposing enough from the outside but the entrance hall staggered her, even though she'd seen pictures of it before. The reality was so much more.

Taste and opulence combined to create one of the most admired interiors in the city. Crystal drops spiraled down from the central chandelier high above, like a static waterfall, spreading sparkles of fractured color over the cream marble floor. Dark mahogany and brass fittings emphasized the sparkle.

In one of the most expensive areas of real estate in the world, this space stated its disdain for mere money. Except that was a double bluff, because the cost of a suite here for a night would keep an average American family for a month.

She tried to despise the kind of lifestyle that required this level of display but she couldn't quite make it. She wanted to call it vulgar but it wasn't. She wanted to condemn it but walking into the space lifted her spirits.

A shame the owner was a Talent who refused to share his gifts with mankind for the common good. Caroline was here to persuade him to change his mind. Not that he knew that yet.

This beautiful place served as nothing but a façade for deception. Because this world-famous hotel was a center for beings calling themselves Talents, who didn't care if humans lived or died and refused to share their gifts with mankind.

And she was the first line of attack.

She had to remember that her name wasn't Caroline but Jillian. For this mission, her name was Jillian. If she thought of herself as Caroline, she'd make a slip, so from her entrance through the great glass doors, she had to become Jillian. She repeated the name in her mind, sinking into the role as her trainers had taught her. Posing as his lost love, with extensive plastic surgery aiding her masquerade, she would do what nobody else had managed to achieve. The organization that had sent her today, the IRDC, the International Research and Development Clinic, needed Talents to help, otherwise the organization couldn't distill the precious essences of what made Talents so special. Only Talents like shape-shifters, vampires and sorcerers had gifts like longevity, strength, the ability to shift form, and to flash from place to place instantly.

This Talent was a sorcerer, descended from a race of people originating in Hungary, people with incredible powers of the mind, telepathy in particular. Talents claimed that everyone could use a certain amount of telepathy, that everyone was born with it but developed a strong shield that few pierced in their lifetimes. The IRDC believed a shortcut to the ability would come if Talents allowed experiments and study. Talents constantly refused to allow the IRDC access, paranoid in

their refusals. Now that Talents had come out of their particular closet and faced the light of day, it should have been easier to persuade them. No such luck. So here she was. On a mission, if not from God, then from the IRDC.

People stood at the checkout desk and three bellboys pushed laden luggage trolleys across the floor. The information desk was clear, so she walked up to it, each subdued tap of her shoes on the cold marble ticking the countdown to her fate.

The staff at the desks wore dark business suits that were only recognizable as a uniform by the T monogram on the lapel, so distinctively the Timothy that the hotel had made the letter into a brand, even trademarked the custom designed font. You could buy towels and robes with its distinctive flourish. As the advertisements in the glossies said, "We sell them to you so you don't have to steal them." She'd bet the guests still stole them, just for kicks.

The man at the desk, who wore a badge with his name, Malcolm, gave her a professional smile but his eyes didn't quite meet hers. Some of the guests here wouldn't like eye contact. It made Jillian feel even more isolated. "May I help you, ma'am?"

"I-I don't have a reservation." She watched the smile melt away. "But I wondered if room 139B was available?" Did Malcolm's eyes widen just a fraction? "My name's Jillian Miller."

Oh yes, they had. He glanced down. "We are very busy," he looked up at her, sharp eyes assessing, "but I believe that room is free. I'll make a note and get someone to take you up."

She was on the brink of saying she'd find her own way but a bellboy stood at her side as soon as Malcolm raised a finger. She took the keycard Malcolm handed her and signed the register. Only on her way to the elevators did she realize that he'd forgotten to ask for her credit card. She'd just given the code word, a mixture of her assumed name, Jillian Miller, and the number of the room, 139B. Maybe credit cards were irrelevant.

In the elevator, the bellboy passed a card through the base of the control panel instead of hitting a button. And where there should have been a button for the thirteenth floor, the one she wanted, there was only a brass dummy button. Nobody would think anything of that because superstitious people wouldn't book rooms on the thirteenth floor, so many hotels just skipped it. It seemed they'd put it to use in the Timothy.

The elevator had an old-world feel, with art deco grilles over obsidian marble. Very classy. "Ma'am, if you swipe your keycard, it will take you directly to your floor," the bellboy said in a voice as dark as chocolate. He was larger than the average bellboy too, his muscles clearly evident through his maroon uniform. She hadn't known they made bellhop uniforms that big.

It was really happening. This was for real. All the way here she'd fought to persuade herself that her handlers at the IRDC trusted her with this operation and finally she believed it.

When they arrived and the doors slid silently open the bellhop stopped her leaving the elevator. "You see that painting?" He indicated a distinctive watercolor of a landscape hanging on the wall directly opposite.

"Yes."

"There are copies opposite every elevator door and they tell you you're on the right floor. The same watercolor, the same view. It works as a double check. Come this way, ma'am."

She followed the man, who pulled her wheeled case, until they reached a door at the end. He took her keycard, swiped it through and she watched a unit slide out from the wall. The bellhop stood aside. "Press your left forefinger on the pad and look into the viewer. It will register your fingerprint and your iris print."

Jillian bent and peered into the eyepiece and put her finger on the pad. A click, a blinding flash of light and the unit silently slid away. The door opened and Jillian caught her breath.

The door opened straight on to a huge room. Huge for a hotel, especially a hotel in New York. Sure, the Timothy was five star, one of the city's best, and it provided a temporary home for celebrities and millionaires but still—Jillian couldn't remember ever being inside anything this luxurious.

A queen-sized bed dominated one end of the room, the deep red draperies above it caught back on gilt hooks. The colors of deep red and cream, enhanced by glints of gold and clear crystal sparkled in the autumn sunshine. Everything spoke of luxury and the people born to expect it.

Not this girl, Caroline Cross from the boondocks. And that was the very last time she'd think of herself as Caroline. No more. Jillian Miller was Chase Maynard's old flame, the woman he thought was dead, and she was more than used to rooms like this.

\* \* \* \* \*

Chase ruthlessly dragged his mind back to the meeting, a discussion of the conferences scheduled for the next six months. He'd allowed a new consulting group to review the situation and make recommendations and now he heartily wished he hadn't. The Timothy group got its bread-and-butter from conferences, as did most big hotel groups. The luxury traffic paid well as did the income from the honeymooners and ordinary rich folks but the conferences saved on administrative costs. The price they charged for the conference rooms more than paid for the reduced prices of the guest rooms.

Just as this person was telling him. Dressed in a good quality off-the-peg suit, the young man, fresh from Harvard, with all the arrogance of the newly qualified MBA, continued to tell him how to run his business. So far they'd told him nothing he didn't already know. He wondered how much longer he could stay awake. A waste of time.

His phone vibrated in his pocket and although he'd told them emergencies only, he sighed in relief. Breaking up another fight between a "happily married" celebrity couple, even arranging for a B-list couple to move out of a suite so an A-list couple could move in, anything would be better than this.

The young man didn't stop in his flow as Chase drew out his cell phone, switching off the blinker as he did so. He touched the screen and read the message. "Jillian Miller checked in to 139B."

"Shit!" He shot to his feet and headed for the door, only then turning around with his customary charming smile, facing the row of shocked people at the conference table. Perhaps only that news would have jolted him from his usual suave calm. He turned his attention to the young man at the table's head and shrugged. "I'm very sorry. I can't ignore this emergency. May we reconvene?" And next time, he'd send one of his deputies. No way would this pompous ass take any more of his time.

He couldn't even remember the man's name but to do him justice, the youth gave him a bright smile. "Sure. But we've dealt with most of it. I can send you my report first thing in the morning."

"Fine." Chase remembered to bestow another smile and add, "It was nice to meet you. You're doing great," before he left the room. If he'd cared about the guy, he would have stopped to give him some advice, like "cut to the real meat right at the start" or "remember your audience", but the presentation had been so lackluster he couldn't work up the interest to do it.

Outside the room, where there was no one to see him, he leaned against the wall, put his head back and took several deep breaths to calm his racing heart. Every time Jillian's name came up, he felt this way, adrenaline rising, heart rate quickening and breath shortening. Three years and

still he felt this way. Even watching a Talent on TV didn't affect him like this.

But it would be another agent from STORM, not Jillian. Jillian was dead. He ran the safe house or more accurately, the safe floor, in her memory. That was why he used her name as part of the code. It hurt to think of her but he never wanted to forget.

He took a moment to remember her laughter, the way she leaned against him to cop a feel at the most inappropriate times, her eyes flashing with delight when he responded with outrage or shock. Her smoky gray eyes had dominated her piquant face, her near-black hair provided a frame for her pale skin, almost vampire-like in its clear, transparent pallor.

It helped to think of her but when he remembered the car crash that had ended her life the familiar grief descended on him—a black cloud that never faded, never eased up however much he invoked it, like poking his tongue into an aching tooth to see if it hurt any less. It never did.

But life went on and right now a STORM agent needed him. Chase straightened up, pulled his jacket straight and headed for the elevators.

Jillian heard a discreet click. It had to be him. Her heart quickened its beat. She kept her back to the door and stared out over the view of Manhattan's swankiest district. The distinctive brownstones down below proudly reminded the gleaming high-rises and modern, more pretentious palazzo-style buildings of the city's origins. She'd read about this city all her life, visited it a couple of times on retreats with her parents and one memorable school trip but never had she dreamed she'd be here in one of New York's flagship hotels, waiting for the owner.

No, that was Caroline. Someone she mustn't think about now. She had to become Jillian Miller, sassy big city girl, born in Queens, worked her way up in the garment district until she was managing a big outlet producing buttons and beads for the world and from there to jewelry designer, a profession she'd only just begun when she'd had the disastrous car crash. She knew New York because it was her home town. Jillian, the woman who'd met Chase Maynord at the first pitch for her jewelry and fallen instantly in love. Or so legend had it and all she had was the legend. Because Chase Maynord, hotel entrepreneur, was also a sorcerer and a Talent. The genes he carried from some Hungarian ancestor made him a deviant, someone whose mind worked differently than everyone else's and so formed a target for the IRDC. Odd that no other member of his family had the trait but his family was small, so maybe it hadn't had the chance to come out in any other.

She felt his presence, standing by the door, staring at her. A tingling awareness she couldn't recall ever knowing before spread through her, starting at her spine and radiating out. Did all deviants give out this sensation? No, they couldn't, or they wouldn't have remained hidden for so long.

He took a step and she heard his voice for the first time, speaking her name. Sure, she'd studied the films of him, heard his voice secondhand but this was real. And it sent shivers up her spine. Shivers of sensual need, shivers of—recognition.

## END OF CHAPTER ONE

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