

Firecracker: Born on the 4th of July

Marteeka Karland

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Chapter One

"LAURA!" Stepping into his private office, Jake roared. It was a complete disaster. Absolutely nothing was on his desk but a blotter, the phone, and one pen. There wasn't even a scrap of paper on the floor, and all his files had disappeared. Not a speck of dust could be found anywhere. Even the windows were free of the grime that had built up in the ten years since he'd cleaned them last -- when he and his partner, Drake Cole, first opened his law office. "What the *hell* have you done?"

"Well." Laura tentatively stepped into Jake's private sanctuary. "I cleaned your office."

"Did I *ask* you to clean my office?" Of all the stupid things this woman had done in the five years she had been in his employment, this was the worst. He started fumbling through the now neatly organized filing cabinets.

Laura pushed her glasses higher on her nose with one finger and stated simply, "No, but it needed it. Badly."

Jake whirled around, advancing on her. "This is *my* office. I'll decide when or *if* it needs cleaning."

"Look." Laura hugged her legal pad to her chest and pushed her glasses up again. "You're the most brilliant lawyer I've ever worked for, but you're a complete slob. Do you have any idea how unprofessional it is when you have to look thirty minutes to find a client's file?"

"I knew exactly where everything was!" he bellowed. "How the hell am I supposed to find anything now?"

He knew she was right, knew he was being unreasonable, but damn it, he wanted her as angry as he was.

"You'll find them the same way every other attorney does. You'll look alphabetically by client's last name or you'll ask me to find it for you." Her composure remained stubbornly in place, though Jake noticed she'd raised her chin a notch.

"And just how the hell are you supposed to get your work done, when you're finding files I could have found myself if you'd just left my office alone?" He moved toward her another couple of steps, not quite invading her personal space, but towering over her smaller frame.

Her eyes flashing in anger, she snatched her glasses from her face. "And how would that be any different from the way it is now? I spend more time in your office than I do in my own. I cleaned your office so you could find your *own* files."

"I had everything right where I could find it. You only spend so much time in here because you want to."

"I beg your pardon!" Outrage radiated from her in waves.

Jake crossed his arms over his chest and smirked. "I see how you look at me. I bet you're trying to find the right time to lock me in and have your wicked way with me."

It was all Jake could do not to burst out laughing as the bright red flush crept up her slender throat to her cute little pixy-like face. He couldn't help himself. The highlight of any day was getting Laura flustered.

Yeah, he was pissed she had rearranged his office, but it was worth it to see her blush. Anger or embarrassment, it didn't make a difference. He just loved pushing her buttons.

"You, Mr. Landon, are a filthy-minded swine." Turning on her heel, Laura practically bolted from his presence. Only when she slammed the door behind her did he actually chuckle.

Quietly.

Chapter Two

Of all the *nerve!* Just because Jake Landon was correct when he said she wanted to have her wicked way with him, didn't give him the right to actually say it.

Was she that transparent? Could he truly know how badly she wanted him? God she hoped not! She didn't think she could survive the embarrassment.

Jake Landon was a brilliant attorney, and sexy as sin. His body was sleekly muscled with just the right amount of bulk for his tall frame. Sometimes, Laura itched to touch his tanned, hair-roughened forearm when he propped himself on her desk, looking over her shoulder at something she was working on.

Aside from his knowledge of the law, aside from her undeniable attraction, he was infuriating and totally inappropriate in everything. His office was only the beginning. The rest of him was worse.

He drove a God-awful Ford pickup in bad need of a paint job and a muffler. And his hair was so long, he had to wear it in a tie at the base of his skull when he went to court. This was not something she considered acceptable. He had to look out for his image, the image of his law office, which represented the people of Wake County.

Not that he cared. He was a fly-by-the-seat-of-his-pants kind of guy. She was stable, organized. Everything he was not.

Thank goodness!

* * *

Jake never thought he could feel so much for someone so different from himself. Laura Ashton was his polar opposite, but she was a classy, elegant woman. She was exactly what he needed in a secretary to help make him successful. The only two people in the crummy little town he'd miss, if New York ever called, would be his best friend and partner, Drake, and Laura.

Too bad she wasn't his type of woman. She was really sexy when she was angry, but that was the only time. The rest of the time she was an anal-retentive pain in the ass.

But when she turned on...

Damn, but he'd bet she was hot in bed. Her chestnut-colored hair was usually tightly and neatly contained in a delicate twist, but toward the end of the day, especially if it was hot and humid, little tendrils would escape to frame her face and neck in tiny springs of curly hair.

She was slender, but her arms and legs were lightly muscled. Sometimes when he pretended to be examining her work over her shoulder, he was actually looking down her blouse. Cheap thrill? Maybe. He actually hoped she'd catch him. He chuckled. He could just imagine the fireworks *that* would cause.

He could also imagine, vividly, all that passion writhing underneath him, gripping his cock with incredible intensity. The image had kept him up nights often enough.

He wasn't sure why he had even come in today. It was July fourth and his office was supposed to be closed. He'd seen Laura's car parked in her usual spot and had been curious. From the looks of his private office, she had probably been in every day that weekend as well.

He really should thank her for all the hard work. He grinned. No doubt Laura wouldn't appreciate exactly what he had in mind. Well, she'd *appreciate* it, but she'd never admit it.

Oh, the things he'd love to do to that tight little body...

Jake blinked several times, snapping back to reality. He found himself doing that a lot lately. It was past time to get laid. Somehow, getting his jollies off with just anyone didn't have the appeal it once had. He wanted someone special. Someone who knew him, knew what he wanted, what he needed. Someone who could push him to the edge of endurance and make him fight for more.

Someone like Laura Ashton.

Chapter Three

After Jake's little tantrum, Laura had called it quits. There was still much she could do, but with Jake there, the chances of her getting anything constructive accomplished were slim to none. He would question everything she did, argue every change with her and they'd just end up fighting.

Oh, well. Today was the Fourth of July. Tonight there would be an incredible fireworks display and one hell of a party. This was the biggest day of the summer in this rural community. The whole town would gather at the fairgrounds tonight to socialize and watch the spectacle. Laura giggled. Some of them would probably *be* the spectacle.

Small Town America. She couldn't imagine living anywhere else.

Laura went home for a quick change of clothes -- a white, button-up blouse and jeans. She was *so* looking forward to tonight. The sky always seemed magical when lit with the bursting, sparkling lights.

Thankful she lived close enough to walk, Laura smiled as she looked around the fairgrounds. The midway bustled with life. Music blared from different directions, children squealed, and laughter permeated everything. This was the most wonderful thing about living in a small town. The county fair dominated the summer, and almost everyone gathered on the grounds for that one week of the year.

Everything about it was truly magical.

"Laura!" an excited female voice called a cheery greeting. "I was afraid you weren't coming!" Diane, her best friend, embraced her warmly.

"Have I ever missed a Fourth of July party?"

Diane laughed. "Not in living memory. Did you get the boss's office cleaned?"

Laura snorted. "Mostly. He barged in on me before I could finish."

"He should have given you a raise. That place was on the verge of being condemned."

"Yup. Oh, well. I didn't come here to think about Jake Landon, Attorney at Law," she drawled. "Get me a hot dog and a beer."

Both women laughed as they walked arm in arm to the enormous flatbed trailer where food and drinks were being sold. A local band played lively music, and spectators of all ages danced and laughed. The air was clean and the smell of grilled food wafted on the soft breeze.

Making her purchase, Laura turned toward a picnic table to eat her goodies and bumped into none other than Jake Landon, spilling her beer all over him. He caught her solidly by her upper arms to keep her from falling.

"I think if you spent less time trying to organize my life, and more time watching where you were going, you'd be a lot better off," Jake snapped, eyes smoldering as he tried to dry his shirt with a couple of napkins. "You're a walking disaster."

"I'm sorry for running into you, but I assure you it wasn't intentional." It wasn't as if she had gone looking for him with the sole purpose of ruining his no doubt expensive shirt. Laura was proud she hung on firmly to her temper. "I came here to enjoy myself, not to fight with you."

"I'm kind of glad I found you. Now I have a chance to talk to you." Jake retained his hold on her arm as he looked around and pointed to a secluded stand of trees just outside the fairgrounds. "Let's talk."

Jake didn't give her much choice but to follow or be dragged. She tried to twist away from him, but he wouldn't let go. Had this been anyone other than Jake, she would have been frightened. He looked angry as hell.

"Jake, let go of me."

He ignored her until they reached their destination, then he whirled around. "Why is it everywhere I go, you still manage to drive me crazy?"

"Are you blaming this on me? Maybe if you'd watch where you were going, you'd still be wearing dry clothing."

"I had no idea you were anywhere around until you drenched me with that damned beer! What are you doing drinking, anyway? You'll ruin my reputation. If you need to have a beer, do it at home where no one can see you."

"You've got some nerve! If you want to talk about who's ruining your reputation, look at that piece of shit you drive. And your hippie hairdo. You need to clean up your own act before trying to place the blame on someone else."

They were both breathing hard. Laura's face felt flushed. A little bead of sweat trickled from Jake's temple.

"God, you're sexy when you're angry." Jake's hoarse whisper preceded his kiss by mere moments. Heat suffused Laura's body as she fought against Jake. Not to get away from him, but for dominance. She wasn't in the mood to be a passive partner.

She grasped his hair and shirt front. He gripped her breast and butt. They held on to anything to get a firm grip on the other. Their tongues dueled, lips sucked, teeth nipped in this mating of mouths.

Laura felt the need building within her very soul. Her cunt clenched and let loose a rush of moisture, preparing her for the fullness of his cock. She bunched his shirt more tightly in her fist and held him to her even as she explored his backside with the other hand. His muscles clenched in her hand as he pumped his pelvis into her belly.

She slid her tongue farther into his mouth, wanting to taste every inch of him, needing the exotic feel of his tongue against hers. When he sucked strongly, drawing her into him even more, she couldn't contain the whimper of pleasure.

Jake's head was spinning. He'd been hard since Laura had first landed in his arms. Just touching her in a non-sexual manner made him stiff as a board. When he actually tasted her, he was ready to shoot off like a bottle rocket.

His hand found its way underneath her blouse and grasped a plump breast, the nipple stabbing the palm of his hand exquisitely. Sweet Jesus! He wanted to suck that nipple as vigorously as he was sucking her tongue.

As badly as he wanted to simply rip off her shirt, slide down her jeans and slide into her creamy heat, he knew this wasn't the right time or place. But, God help him, he

would have her. No matter what, he would not let her frosty exterior reemerge. He would do everything in his power to keep her passion high and burning hot.

Tangling the fingers of one hand in her hair once again, he pulled her head back, looking into Laura's dark eyes. They were slightly glazed in her passion and she had never looked more lovely.

He had never wanted a woman more in his entire life. Somehow, he'd known from the moment he first saw her that she was the one, but he had been too stubborn to open his eyes to what his heart already knew. It had only taken him five years to see it.

Oh, well. He'd never been a fast learner.

* * *

It took Laura's sexually hazed mind a moment to process that Jake was no longer kissing her. When she opened her eyes to find him staring at her, his face almost savage-looking with lust, her heart skipped a beat.

This man wanted her.

They both jumped when the first display of fireworks exploded above them. Laura didn't resist when Jake pulled her into his arms, holding her tightly as they both caught their breath. She desperately needed to think.

The myriad of colors above echoed the sensations coursing through her. Laura was on the verge of an explosion of her own. She knew sex with Jake would be good, but nothing could have prepared her for the intensity of the pleasure he ignited within her.

And that was only a kiss and a few caresses.

"This isn't the place for this." Jake's voice was husky when he spoke, his breath fanning the tendrils of hair at her temple that had escaped her clip.

Laura giggled. "No. We'd probably ruin your reputation if we fucked in public."

Jake's chuckle vibrated through her straight to her clit. She didn't understand why this man made her feel so much -- she didn't really care. The only thing that mattered was that he was just as affected as she was.

"Come on." Jake urged her farther away from the park, toward a chain link fence. "Hurry and we can watch the end of the firework display."

Laura laughed even as she picked up the pace, jogging after Jake, her hand firmly in his. "I'd rather make our own."

Jake chuckled. "Oh, we will. All night long."

He led Laura through a hole cut in the fence and toward a two-story, white, plantation-style house. The second floor balcony overlooked the park. Trees and shrubs gave the place a secluded feel that Laura never would have guessed possible in such a busy area. Two staircases curved around from the back door of the house to each end of the balcony.

"Wow." It was an absolutely beautiful home.

"Not bad for a slob, huh?"

Laura groaned. "Oh, let's not start that again."

Jake laughed and slid his arm around Laura's waist. "I don't know. I stand by my statement that you're beautiful when you're angry."

"I think you said 'sexy.' There's a difference, you know."

"Of course," he said as he guided her toward the stairs, "and I intend to show you the difference tonight."

The explosions in the night still popped and cracked followed by the brilliant burst of colors. The intensity she saw in Jake's face was every bit as explosive. She had never been so affected by a man before.

This was it. Her most secret dream, the one fantasy she didn't dare think about because, deep down inside, she knew she already loved him -- had loved him for a long time. Sex with Jake wouldn't be "just sex," and she was very much afraid that when she lost her heart to him, he would break it.

When Jake pulled her against him, her back to his front, she forgot everything but the pleasure. His lips at her neck, his hands carefully, lovingly cupping her breasts, his cock nestled into her ass -- every touch driving her wild. God, how she longed to have him inside her!

"You have no idea how long I've waited for this." Jake's whisper in her ear raised chill bumps all over her. "You're mine tonight, and I intend to do everything to you I've dreamed of since the first day you walked into my office."

Laura sucked in a sharp breath when his teeth clamped down on her shoulder. When his tongue soothed the hurt with a wet lick, her scream echoed in the night. She couldn't form a coherent reply, no matter how hard she tried. Fortunately, Jake didn't seem to expect her to.

With a growl, Jake grabbed the front of her blouse and tore it open, the buttons scattering. His hands covered her lace-covered breast. Tucking his fingers under the flimsy material at the strap of her bra, he tugged, brushing her nipples as he tucked the lace under her breasts.

Jake's hands kneaded her flesh, pinching her nipples lightly. His breathing grew shallow and ragged at her ear as he continued his pleasurable torment of her neck.

It was heaven.

It was hell.

And she couldn't get enough of either.

* * *

Jake couldn't believe how velvety soft her skin was. Her breasts were full and firm. He wanted to be gentle. He wanted to show her his skill as a lover and impress and woo her with soft words and gentle caresses.

Instead, he found himself tearing the clothes from her body any way he could. His words consisted mostly of growls and grunts once he had his hands on her creamy flesh. God, he was going to come all over himself if he didn't get a grip! At this moment, however, all he could think of was burying his cock balls-deep in her pussy.

Her jeans proved to be more difficult to remove than the shirt now hanging open -- minus the buttons -- from her shoulders. With her sneakers on, he simply couldn't get them off. He slid them, panties and all, down her slim thighs, then forced her legs as far apart as the restrictive material allowed by wedging his shoulders between them.

Turning his body so he looked up at her from between her legs, he growled, holding onto her hips as he lunged for her cunt with his mouth.

Laura cried out when his tongue found her clit and he sucked vigorously. She tasted like heaven. The slightly musky smell of her sex sparked something animal inside him. He had to leave his scent on her. He had to fill her full of himself, come with his cock firmly encased in her slick heat.

Laura grasped the rail of the balcony and braced herself -- her legs trembled and he could feel her muscles bunching. Jake eagerly sucked her juice as it dripped from her cunt, drenching the lower half of his face.

"Jake! Oh, God, I can't wait any longer!"

Jake simply grunted as he crawled from underneath her and unbuttoned his jeans. She bent over, fumbling with her shoes -- probably trying to get them off -- but Jake simply grabbed her hips and slid into her.

The night echoed with both their cries.

"I... can't... hold back," Jake panted.

"Don't!" Laura screamed. "Do it! Fuck me!"

The exquisite feeling of her pussy sucking him into her was overwhelming. Over and over he impaled her. His arms circled her waist, pulling her even closer, even harder into him. The standing position made lunging a bit difficult, but that was just as well. If he'd had any more friction, he probably wouldn't have lasted as long as he had. As it was, he was going to come.

Now.

"Laura. Come. Come for me now!" His voice was nothing more than a croak. His hips moved frantically, losing their rhythmic thrust for a more sporadic cadence, an almost desperate movement into her grasping cunt. She screamed and thrashed against him when her orgasm overtook her, and that triggered his own.

He shouted, pumping spurt after spurt deep within her, filling her pussy with his sperm...

Whoa! Back up there.

What the *fuck* had he just done? Sex without a condom? Oh, shit!

"Laura," Jake panted, "God, honey, I'm sorry."

Laura, her own breathing still a bit erratic, turned her head to give him a puzzled look. "Sorry? For what?"

"No condom," was all he could say.

She didn't say anything for a moment.

"I'm clean," she said softly, still panting a bit, "and on the pill."

He let out a slow breath. Funny, hearing she couldn't get pregnant from this encounter didn't elicit the relieved response he expected. He was almost... disappointed.

This was getting *way* out of hand.

And he didn't care even a little bit.

Lifting Laura securely in his arms -- her jeans still around her ankles, caught on her shoes -- he carried her through the open French doors into his bedroom.

This was where she belonged. This was where he intended to make love to her the rest of the night and all the next day. And the next night, and the next day... for as long as she'd let him.

"This time, we'll do it right." He smiled at her, laying her gently on the bed, and began removing her shoes and jeans. "I want you naked."

Laura's contented sigh was musical. She stretched, reaching for him. "Only if you get naked, too."

Jake admired her body in the soft lighting of the bedside lamp. "You are so beautiful after you make love."

Laura blushed becomingly. "I thought you said I was sexy."

Jake chuckled. "I said you're sexy when you're angry, when your passion is simmering on the surface wanting to explode." He shed the remainder of his clothing and crawled on the bed to lie beside her, drawing lazy circles with a finger on her softly rounded belly. "When you're sated, satisfied, you're the most beautiful woman I've

ever seen.” Jake paused. “Hell, you’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen, period.”

Laura’s smile put the brilliant firework display, still going on outside, to shame. He knew at that moment he would do anything he had to in order to keep that expression of pleasure and joy on her face.

Oh, he was *so* in trouble.

* * *

Laura reached for Jake when he took a nipple in his mouth and gently laved it with his tongue. She whimpered as she twined her fingers in his hair. Arching her back, she pulled him closer into her chest, craving his mouth and teeth and tongue.

Jake nipped the flesh just above her left breast, then at her throat, then his mouth found hers. This kiss was gentle, languid, as if they had all the time in the world. She sincerely hoped they did, but knew better than to expect anything more than the night.

With lazy gentleness, Jake maneuvered between her legs and entered her with exquisite slowness. His unhurried strokes, combined with his thorough kisses, enflamed her beyond anything she had ever experienced. She was desperate for more of him, but she wanted it to go on forever and ever and ever.

With a cry, she arched her back and wrapped her legs around him, resting her feet on his calves. She met his every thrust with one of her own and it wasn’t long before his pace quickened and he began pounding her in earnest.

Their tender lovemaking soon turned into a wild, passionate, wet-and-nasty fuck. And she loved every second of it.

It wasn’t long before she felt the familiar tingle start in her cunt and she knew she was about to come. With one last scream, she let go and her orgasm crashed around her. She clung to Jake, needing his strong, muscular arms around her as much as she needed his cock inside her.

Jake gave one final, mighty thrust that scooted her halfway across the bed and shouted so loud, she was afraid he’d strained something. Sweat dampened his skin, as it did hers, and he collapsed on top of her. He was heavy, but she loved it.

When he rolled off her, he took her with him, wrapping his arms securely around her as he settled them both in for a little rest. Laura sighed contentedly.

Neither spoke.

There was nothing to say.

At least nothing she could bring herself to say first.

Chapter Four

Jake sat on the couch in his living room, torn between elation and dread. The phone call he had been waiting patiently on for six months had come this morning.

The weekend was everything he'd hoped it would be and more. He and Laura had indeed sparked their own private fireworks display -- in just about every room in the house, in just about every way imaginable.

Jake's smile faded a bit when he thought of leaving this little town he'd thought of only as a junction between cities. For the past ten years, the majority of his cases had come from one of the three large cities two hours north, south, and east of Mount Bell, Kentucky, in Wake County where he lived. Things had worked out quite well. He was one of only a handful of attorneys in Mount Bell -- he and his best friend and partner, Drake Cole. He had built his reputation quite solidly, despite what Laura thought of his appearance.

Laura.

Jake smiled again. Somehow, she had gotten under his skin but good. He would miss Small Town America, but it wouldn't be so bad with Laura at his side. Who knew, she might enjoy New York City.

He, Jake Landon, had been offered a partnership at Schofield, Barney and Jones, one of the most prestigious law firms in the United States. The amount of money he had been offered was obscene and guaranteed to triple in ten years.

He had reached every goal he had set for himself before the age of forty. Not bad for a slob.

He had to tell Laura.

* * *

"When do you leave for New York?" Laura had walked into the living room just as Jake hung up the phone. She had only caught the end of his conversation, but still couldn't believe what she had heard. He was leaving. He was really leaving.

"Tomorrow. I'm supposed to meet the corporate law staff and sign the contracts." He seemed happy, but he was more reserved than she would have expected.

"This has got to be a dream come true." Laura smiled. "Congratulations."

"Well --" Jake ran a hand through his hair. "-- I'd hoped you'd come with me. I'm not sure I want to do this without you."

Laura might not be afraid of Jake when it came to their work together, and she knew she had helped build his career, but when her heart was involved, she was terrified of him. She simply couldn't be sure if he meant he wanted her as his employee or something else. This was one instance where he was going to have to spell it out for her. She wanted him, wanted to be with him, but she wasn't willing to leave her home. If he wanted a wife, he'd be willing to stay. So she did the only thing she could to protect her heart. She simply didn't ask.

"Oh, Jake." She put on her best smile as she laid a hand on his cheek. "You'll find a paralegal and a personal assistant in New York."

Jake blinked several times. "You mean you won't come with me?"

"This is my home, Jake. The only home I've ever known. I wish you every happiness and as much success as you can handle, but I could never leave Mount Bell." It was the truth. Laura couldn't fathom living in such a place as New York. She was a small town girl through and through.

"Look." Jake grasped her upper arms and kissed her forehead. "Will you at least think about it?" He looked almost pleading. Could he mean he needed her as more than just his employee?

"No." If he did want her in his life, he had to accept that she couldn't leave Mount Bell.

Laura kissed him gently. She needed to think and she suspected he did too. "Call me when you get ready to leave. I'll drive you to the airport. Do I need to make any other arrangements?"

Jake just looked at her, his expression unreadable. "No. Everything's taken care of." He smiled. "I would appreciate the ride, though."

"I'll leave you to get ready, then." Laura was thankful she had dressed this morning. She wasn't sure she could leave with her dignity intact if she had to talk with him much longer. She was very afraid she might fall at his feet and beg him to stay. Instead, she simply kissed his cheek and walked out the door.

Fortunately, she made it inside her own home before the tears came.

Sometimes, life just plain sucked.

Chapter Five

Everything about Schofield, Barney and Jones screamed wealth. This was what he'd always wanted, wasn't it? For the life of him, he couldn't muster the excitement he should have, would have if a certain smart-mouthed paralegal back in Mount Bell, Kentucky, hadn't wormed her way into his heart.

Despite all the money he had been offered, despite having his dreams and goals in the palm of his hand, Jake hated every second of this trip. The air smelled funny, the noise was a constant clatter, and the food was so processed, everything tasted like chemicals and cardboard.

He missed the clean mountain air, and the crickets and katydids at night. He missed good old-fashioned country home cooking.

He missed Mount Bell.

He missed Laura.

Jake was halfway through a meeting with Nicholas Jones, one third of the firm's namesake, before he realized he hadn't heard a word the man had said. This simply wasn't the place for him. He knew where he needed to be.

He knew who he needed to be with.

Interrupting Mr. Jones, Jake made his apologies and excused himself. He needed to get home.

Home!

He'd never thought he would think of Mount Bell as home, but there it was.

First, he had a purchase to make. If he was going to be a partner, he had to have a contract.

* * *

Laura had never been so puzzled. Jake had called her three days after he left for New York and insisted she meet him in Courtroom A. So far, the only people there were Judge Bishop, Jake's partner, Drake, and Drake's paralegal, Irene.

"Miss Ashton, I have to be in court in twenty minutes. Where is Mr. Landon?"

"He told me to be here at ten-thirty, Your Honor." She looked back at the door. Wishful thinking. "I don't know where he is."

Any minute now...

Shit.

Where the hell *was* he?

"I'm sorry I'm late." Jake entered the courtroom in a business suit, carrying only a manila folder, which he handed to Judge Bishop. "Everything is in order, Your Honor. All this needs is a few signatures."

Something was wrong. Jake was nervous. Jake was *never* nervous. At least he never let it show.

"Jake," Laura whispered, "what's going on?"

He wiped his hands on his expensive-looking pants, his breathing a bit rapid. "I turned down the job in New York, Laura."

"You what?" Laura breathed. Her heart rate jumped, and she broke out in a fine sweat.

"I'm staying in Mount Bell. You were right. This is home."

Laura smiled, genuinely pleased. "But what's all this about?"

Jake dug into his jacket pocket and handed her a tiny white box with a red ribbon around it.

Laura didn't *dare* even hope this was what she thought it was.

"For you. Please accept it, with all my love, Laura." Jake's voice was almost a whisper and he dropped to one knee. "I can't live here, in this town, without you. Marry me."

Laura couldn't help herself. She broke out into a fit of giggles as she got on her knees with him and rained kisses all over his face.

"Is that a yes?" Drake asked from over Jake's shoulder. Laura could hear Irene alternately giggling then sniffing.

"Of course it's a 'yes'," Jake snorted in between Laura's kisses. "Was there ever any doubt?"

Judge Bishop barked a laugh. "Boy --" His gruff southern accent drew the word into two syllables. "-- you've been in my courtroom hundreds of times over the last ten years and I've never seen you so nervous. Not even when you presented your first case."

Everyone laughed, and Laura enjoyed seeing Jake blush for once.

"Yes." Jake cleared his throat. "Well. A guy doesn't ask a woman to marry him every day, you know. I had a right to be a little nervous."

Laura and Jake both got to their feet. "So," Laura asked, "what's all this about? What did you give Judge Bishop?"

"An application for a marriage license." Laura opened her mouth to speak, but Jake cut her off. "It needs your signature before Judge Bishop can approve it and marry us. I know you'll want a church wedding, but those things take time to plan. I want to marry you now. You can have everything you want later."

"Oh, how *sweet*," Irene sniffled again.

Laura kissed Jake. "I love you, Jake Landon. I don't need a fancy wedding, I only need you."

"Then let's do this and get back home. I want to make a few more fireworks."

And they did. After all, their love was born on the Fourth of July. One couldn't expect anything else.

Marteeka Karland

Marteeka makes her home in Kentucky with her brat husband and her darling son. (Or is that the other way around?) Family has always and always will be her passion in life. She works as an Emergency Room Technician and has for the past eight years.

She has been writing for most of her life, but has only recently realized her potential when she found erotic romance. This genre opened up a whole new world of possibilities for Marteeka and she is thriving on the endless promise of what is to come. Science Fiction has been her favorite topic since she saw her first episode of *Star Trek*. Now she combines Sci-Fi with erotic romance and feels she has found her place in the writing world.

Marteeka welcomes comments from her readers. You can contact her at mkarland@net-power.net.