



In the Runes: Defending Serenity

By Loribelle Hunt © 2006

www.cobblestone-press.com

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, organizations, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

Copyright© 2006 Loribelle Hunt

ISBN: 978-1-60088-066-7

Cover Artist: Sable Grey

Editor: Melanie Noto

Excerpt from Invasion Earth by Loribelle Hunt

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced electronically or in print without written permission, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in reviews.

Cobblestone Press, LLC

www.cobblestone-press.com

Loribelle Hunt

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Deanna and Sable for giving me such a great opportunity and to Melanie for making this book shine.

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

Chapter One

Holman Correctional Facility, Atmore, Alabama

Sometime after noon, Boyd Graham stepped out of the gate and into the parking lot, a free man. He figured he could spare a moment for the excitement surging through him. Grinning, he spread his arms wide and lifted his face to the weak December sun.

Freedom.

Lowering his hands to his hips, Boyd took a good look around the outside of the place where he'd spent the last ten years of his life. The prison was an hour north of the Gulf of Mexico, and there was no sign of the sea here. The place was surrounded on all sides by tall pines, and the rotten egg smell of a paper plant drifted faintly on the wind. He couldn't wait to get home and back on the water.

A car turned down the row in front of him and screeched to a stop, the driver throwing it into park and jumping out. It was Boyd's little brother, Walker, who immediately caught Boyd up in a bear hug. Boyd pounded his baby brother's back and laughed.

They stepped back and sized each other up. Walker was the only person in the world who gave a rat's ass about him. The once scrawny kid had filled out over the years; his chest and back were now broad, his biceps bulging and covered in tattoos. He looked as tough as Boyd and had the same build. He'd managed to stay out of jail over the years, but he'd had a string of close calls.

Loribelle Hunt

Boyd grinned. "Been hittin' the iron, kid?"

Walker snorted. "Get in the damned car. I haven't been a kid since I was ten."

Boyd stopped and took his first good look at the vehicle. *His car*. The wreck he'd won in a poker game twelve years ago had been completely restored.

"Looks good, doesn't she?" Walker asked with pride.

As if it might be a mirage and disappear on contact, Boyd reached out and skimmed his hand over the surface of the roof. His fingertips met midnight black metal and he swallowed the lump in his throat. It was just a damned car. Well, as much as a 1968 Camaro could be *just a car*.

He lifted the gleaming door handle to swing the heavy door open. Removing the pack from his back, he tossed it over the seat and slid in, pulling the door closed behind him. The reupholstered leather seats were soft and plush, and as they exited the parking lot he started to relax for the first time in ten long years.

It was a three hour drive home to Duluth. The small town on the Chattahoochee River in Alabama was only a stone's throw from both Georgia and Florida. It'd never seemed much like home until he couldn't go to it.

He took the time to study his little brother. The owner of the only garage in Duluth looked prosperous. When Walker had sent him word he was opening a garage, Boyd hadn't asked too many questions. Where a petty criminal had come up with the kind of cash necessary to start a business, he could only imagine. Walker had always been a talented mechanic, so the move made sense. Made him look legit. And the place would give Boyd gainful employment, too. A return to prison was not part of his plans.

He hadn't been in and all fired rush to return to Duluth until he'd heard she was back. Closing his eyes, he called up her memory. *Serenity Lynn Jameson*. The woman responsible for his ten years of hell. The last time he'd seen her in the flesh she was sitting across a small table from him in the county jail's visitation room, close to tears and wringing her hands. If not for the guards, he might have reached to comfort her, and

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

that had pissed him off. It still did.

Serenity had always been innocent and demure. He'd watched her grow from a skinny gangly teenager to a knock out twenty-two year-old. He knew better, but she was a woman he just had to sample. And sample he had. Once. Only, once wasn't nearly enough.

Serenity had been meeting him for the second go when the trouble had started. He'd defended her, why, he couldn't fathom, and a man was killed. The one righteous thing Boyd had ever done landed him in prison.

The last time he saw her she'd asked him to forgive her and promised he'd be out soon. After all, her daddy was the judge. Why would he send away a man for defending his daughter's virtue?

Boyd snorted. Yeah, right. He'd seen the writing on the wall. He'd screwed Judge Jamesons' daughter. One man was dead, and the other from the wrong side of the tracks was in handcuffs. He didn't have a chance in hell.

Serenity had gone back north to college before the trial started. For some reason he'd expected to see her there anyway. Her not showing up for it felt like rejection, something he wasn't accustomed to, a chink in his armor. He beat the emotion down, but not before vowing to make her pay. When he'd heard his sentence, ten years without parole, in his mind he'd doubled her sentence, too. She'd spent the ten years in her own kind of exile, on the other side of the state.

And now she was back as Duluth's new police chief.

"You're awfully quiet over there," Walker cut into his thoughts.

He smiled, the movement tightening muscles long unused to such action.

"Just contemplating revenge, brother."

Walker arched an eyebrow. "Lynn Jameson?"

"I call her Serenity." He breathed her name.

Walker shook his head.

"Don't go there, Boyd. She's Duluth's Chief of Police now, and she's dating Tim Monroe."

Rage roiled through him. That was *his* cunt and he wasn't done with it yet. He'd spent years dreaming of his one taste of her and the

Loribelle Hunt

things he'd do to her when he was free. Most of them were illegal in Alabama. He didn't care, and neither would she. He'd make her beg. It was a vision that had carried him through the years. The perfect Serenity Jameson, on her knees before him.

"Monroe can't have her," he bit out through clenched teeth. "Not until I'm done with her."

"Fuck," Walker muttered.

This time Boyd's smile was for real. "I intend to."

"No, man," Walker looked over at Boyd after he steered the car onto the highway heading home. "She's not the girl you remember."

Of course she wouldn't be. The woman he remembered was sweet and innocent, and he'd been unable to resist her. He'd held back, afraid he might hurt her, and he hoped life had hardened her as much as it had him. When he started fucking her this time, he wouldn't stop. She'd better be able to take it.

"She's a real ball breaker now," Walker added.

Boyd smiled. Good. He'd break her of that. Would revel in doing so, actually. He was going to make her need him, crave him, the way he had her. And when he'd satisfied his longing for her, he'd move on. *Then* Monroe could have her.

Lost in his plans, the hours flew by and he was surprised when they pulled off the road into the garage's parking lot. They drove around back and he spotted the small white shotgun house, which looked exactly like it had in the pictures Walker had sent him. It appeared to be well cared for, with a narrow porch stretching across the front. He'd expected to see it, to live in it, although he wasn't sure if he'd ever consider it home.

To his surprise, a woman lounged on the porch waiting for them. Her booted feet were propped on the rail as she gently rocked in one of three rocking chairs near the door. Her long legs were encased in jeans, and she wore a tight T-shirt with a light jacket thrown over it. Her long hair was caught up in a ponytail at the back of her head.

Boyd got out of the car and took his time approaching her, halting when he reached the bottom step. Her feet thudded to the floor as she stood up and looked him over from top to bottom, and then up again. Her

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

lips curled up in a slight smile.

"You look good, Boyd," she said, in the husky voice that haunted his dreams. His cock hardened in response.

"Serenity." His voice was edgy. "I didn't expect you to be part of my welcome home committee."

"I'm not."

She looked around him to Walker.

"Can we go inside a minute?"

"Sure." He stepped to the door with a key. Serenity shook her head and arched an eyebrow, no doubt wondering why someone would need to lock their door in tiny Duluth. Well, let her wonder. Walker held out his arm, like he was the picture of gallantry. Boyd snorted.

"After you."

Serenity stepped through the door and led the way down the hall to a small kitchen. Boyd hated the suspicion that snaked through him. How did she know his brother's house so well?

His curiosity must have shown on his face, because Walker laughed. "It's not what you're thinking, Boyd."

Walker reached into the refrigerator, pulled out three beers, and passed them around. Serenity twisted off her cap and took a long swallow. He stared at the movement of her throat as she gulped down the cold brew, wondering what it would look like full of his cock.

Lynn felt Boyd's gaze on her, and remembered with a start what had drawn her to him all those years ago. He had a way of making a woman his complete focus, and the naïve girl she'd been hadn't stood a chance in hell against him. Good thing she was all grown up now.

But she was dismayed to learn she wasn't immune to his intense masculinity. It took all she had not to cross her legs against the heat pooling in her pussy as his cool gray eyes speared her with a mixture of lust, anger, and hate. She felt it like a blow to her stomach. She hadn't realized he *hated* her. And he wanted her to know it.

Walker cleared his throat and she wrenched her gaze from Boyd to see him leaning tense and coiled against the counter. She almost laughed. Who did he expect trouble from? Anxiety stiffened her muscles. Maybe

Loribelle Hunt

from where he stood, it was a toss up.

"I found your thief," she said in the hushed room. Then she took another drink of beer. She wasn't much of a drinker, but the situation and her nerves seemed to call for it. "You were right. Jimmy Richards."

"I thought so."

She sighed.

"You need to press charges, Walker." She held her hand up when he started to interrupt. "Not pressing charges is just going to lead to more trouble for this kid."

He shook his head. "Trust me on this, Lynn. He's not a bad kid. He just needs a firm hand. A little guidance."

From the corner of her eye she caught Boyd's incredulous look and snickered. She didn't know what his objection was, but hers was easy enough to figure out. Jimmy Richards was a juvenile delinquent who was fast on his way to becoming an adult delinquent. He didn't need a firm hand—he needed to spend the night in her jail. She had told Walker as much, but their conversation was frustrating and had gotten her nowhere. Finishing the beer, she put it down and walked to the kitchen door.

"Fine," she said, hand on the doorknob. "Do it your way. But the next person *will* press charges, Walker."

"There won't be a next time," he responded calmly. "I'll track Jimmy down tomorrow and put him to work. He can pay off what he took that way."

She rolled her eyes. She'd be amazed if that straightened the kid up. Of all the hard cases she'd known over the years, Jimmy was at the bottom of her list of likely reformers.

"You're dreaming, Walker. Let me know if you need me," she added, careful not to look at Boyd as she opened the door. "See y'all later."

When she pulled it shut behind her, she released a pent up sigh of...what? Angst? Lust? She didn't stop examine it too closely. Their little cove off the river was visible down the slope of the backyard. Lit by the glow from the back porch and the dock Christmas lights, she ambled to it, meeting the parallel path and turning toward home. Forcing her mind

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

away from Boyd, she spent the fifteen minute walk concentrating on work.

Something was very wrong in Duluth, but she didn't know what. Not yet, anyway. In the normal course of events there wasn't much activity in their little hamlet off the main flow of the Chattahoochee. But two days ago, someone had turned in ten thousand dollars found on the riverbank, and she had reports coming in every week of strange activity on the river. Boats running without lights, and lights where there shouldn't be any. Of course, by the time she arrived on the scene each time, there was no sign of anything. She regretted she hadn't taken the incidents more seriously, which she hadn't done until the money showed up. They didn't have much in way of crime in her town. The major stuff took place over in Dothan or down in Panama City.

Her back porch came into view and she quickened her pace. The house was a replica of Walker's, down to the peeling paint. She'd caught the look on Boyd's face when she'd entered the house and was familiar with the layout. For a minute, he actually wondered if she had something going on with his brother.

Her smile was bitter. No way. Reformed or not, she'd learned her lesson about screwing the town bad boy. Walker seemed to have it in his head she was off limits, anyway. The two of them made for an odd friendship, but it was real. Boyd didn't have a friendly bone in his body.

So why had his presence turned her on so much? Even now her pussy was wet and throbbing. It was a sensation she wasn't used to. The few men she'd spent time with over the years never turned her on the way Boyd had when she was twenty-two. She'd started to think that maybe she was just a touch on the frigid side. She groaned. Apparently not. She obviously had a thing for men who redefined the term *bad boy*.

She paused at the bottom step and looked up at the stars. Why had he come back? And why did he have to be such a threat to her restraint? She'd spent ten years paying penance for what had happened between them. Ten years dating the right kind of men. Okay, maybe they were a little boring, but she was a cop and they weren't criminals. A definite plus. Shaking off the funk, she went up the steps and opened her backdoor.

Loribelle Hunt

She didn't bother with a light and stalked straight through the kitchen to her bedroom, tugging her shirt off over her head as she went. A bath was just the thing to ease the tension strumming through her, and maybe she'd use her new waterproof vibrator for good measure. She peeled off her jeans, stepped into the small bathroom, and flipped on the light before starting the water.

Doing a quick mental inventory of what she needed—a towel, a glass of wine, a book, and the vibrator—she hurried back into the bedroom and came to a complete standstill. Boyd lay stretched out on her bed.

"What the hell are you doing here?"

"Enjoying the view."

He leered at her and she resisted the urge to try and cover herself. Instead, she gave him her coldest look.

"Leave," she bit out between clenched teeth. "Before I arrest you for breaking and entering."

He jumped up from the bed and loomed in front of her. She hated that she backed up, and what was worse, his display of aggression turned her on. *Oh God, please don't let him touch me.* There was no way she'd be able to resist him if he broke the inches separating them. His head dipped down and her breathing hitched. This was it. She was a goner. He would either kill her or fuck her and she didn't really care which. *You're an idiot, Lynn.*

"Waited ten years for this," he murmured before catching her lips with his.

His tongue was slow and gentle as it slid over her lower lip and pushed inside her mouth. Gliding over her teeth, thrusting in and out, it was a tease of a kiss. Frustrated with its taunting nature, she growled and leaned into him, pressing her breasts against his chest hoping to spur him on. He withdrew, panting from in his effort to stay in control.

With one arm around her waist, he held her still as his other hand wiggled inside her panties and found her clit. Arching her back, she pressed her mound against his fingers. She was so close to coming. A little harder, a little faster. She wasn't sure if she panted the words out or he

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

had an instinctive knowledge of her body. She was right on the edge, with little tremors beginning in her legs, when he stopped.

She almost howled with disappointment. Her eyes snapped open and she met his gaze, recoiling at the anger she saw there. If he was that angry with her, why was he here? His hand still cupped her and his finger flicked over her clit. She couldn't repress the shudder of response or the groan that escaped her lips.

"Have you let Tim Monroe touch you here?" he rasped, one long finger pushing into her pussy.

She gasped, riding the sensation, ignoring the question. A second finger joined the first and they slid leisurely in and out of her. After a moment he stopped, turning her so that her back was against the wall, and he bit her neck.

"Ow," she yelped, although she felt more liquid pool against his fingers at the singular assault.

He chuckled. "You liked that. I can feel it here." He wiggled his fingers deep inside her.

"I asked you a question, Serenity," he said and though his tone was soft, she heard an underlying edge of menace. What was the question?

"Tim Monroe," he reminded her.

"I don't see that it's any of your business," she responded, knowing her answer was ridiculous under the circumstances. Boyd was not a man to trifle with. He was capable of anything. She'd seen him kill a man.

His eyes narrowed on her face and she felt a spurt of fear. He lowered his head until they were nose to nose and the hand that only moments ago had cupped her waist now rested on her collarbone...and twitched. Sliding it up, he lightly stroked the sides of her neck. The movement was both tender and threatening at the same time. She gulped.

"No," she whispered. "He hasn't touched me."

"Good," he said in a hard tone. "This is *mine*."

Removing his fingers from her pussy he pinched her clit hard enough to send sparks through her. She rode a wave of pleasure/pain and when he released his hold on her clitoris to rub against it, the orgasm broke over her. She cried out and trembled in his arms.

Loribelle Hunt

When her shudders slowed, Boyd picked her up and carried her to the bed. Dropping her in the center, he stood back and with a jerk ripped his shirt over his head and yanked off his jeans and shoes. Condom in hand, he came down on top of her, crushing her into the mattress. She tasted sweeter than he remembered, and his control was a thin thread. He had to get inside her *now*. Lifting enough to rip open the packet and roll on the condom, he looked up to meet her gaze.

It was full of wary lust and although he'd wanted her afraid, had even been turned on by her fear, now her caution cut him and spurred his anger. If she didn't know him well enough to realize he'd never physically harm her, the hell with it. He didn't have time to sooth her now, and he didn't care what she thought anyway. Did he? His fingers sought out her pussy and he guided his cock to it, thrusting deep. Her eyes widened and her body clenched around him. *Oh, fuck. He cared.* He closed his eyes and fought down whatever emotion was swelling his throat.

Seated deep inside her, not daring yet to move, he realized Serenity's hair was still up and he tugged out the elastic holding it. He ran his fingers through her long auburn hair, fanning it out across the pillow. He'd dreamed about that hair, about feeling it slide over his bare skin. A simple enough fantasy to fulfill.

He rolled them over and brought her upright over him. *And yes, the ends of her hair brushed his chest, just like he'd imagined.* He gathered it in his hands and tugged at it until she was forced to lean over. She didn't exactly resist, but she hesitated enough to fire his temper again. He withdrew from her pussy and thrust back in, rocking her forward against his chest. She dropped her hands on his shoulders to brace herself, and looked at him in question when he didn't continue.

Now that his cock was nestled deep inside her, he had better control over the hunger eating at him. Enough to make her come again and again, desperate for him. He *needed* her desperate for him. And he needed the time to reacquaint himself with her body. It was going to be a long time before he was done with her. Tonight, and down the road.

He reached for her breasts, palming them, the hard tips of her nipples spearing his hands. They were smaller than he remembered, but

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

she was thinner, sleeker with unfamiliar muscles. It was obvious she worked her body hard. He grinned. He had every intention of putting her through her paces. His fingers closed over the nubs and he twisted them, wringing a gasp from her.

Sliding one arm around her back, he pulled her closer and sucked one nipple into his mouth. She groaned and ground against his hips. There was no way she was coming again so soon, but sweet Jesus, damned if she didn't tighten around his cock and mewl like a kitten when he bit her nipple. Her fingers dug into his shoulders as she rode him, with fine tremors shaking her rigid body. He wasn't sure if he could take that again, the feeling of her clamping down on his dick without him coming. He wanted to have his own fun, too.

Rolling her back over, he slid his arms under her knees and lifted her legs over his shoulders. The position left her open and vulnerable, but the only thing he saw in her eyes was desire. Good. He didn't have time for fear. Not now.

He braced his arms next to her head, wrapped his hands in her hair, and gripped her skull, kissing her hard, the way he had wanted to earlier. With no restraint, no control, no holds barred. Just the way he was going to fuck her. Withdrawing slowly inch by inch, until only the head of his cock remained inside her, he stopped the kiss and met her hot gaze.

"Ready?" he asked gruffly. "I'm gonna fuck you, Serenity. Hard."

Long seconds ticked by as she looked into his eyes. What did she see there? Finally she nodded. He wasn't sure why he'd waited, but once he had her approval he slammed home. Her eyes widened in surprise and her hands flew up to grip his shoulders. Her grasp bordered on pain, her nails digging into his flesh, and he caught her again in a bruising kiss as he pounded into her.

Her soft gasps and groans wrapped around him, driving him higher, and he regretted he didn't have it in him to reach between them and force another orgasm on her. He was so close and it had been so long, there was no way he was pausing now. He'd take care of her later. When he had more control. Right. That's what he would do.

He threw back his head with a roar, feeling the tightly corded

Loribelle Hunt

muscles from his neck to his thighs clench, as he came. The orgasm seemed to go on forever, his body unwilling to give up the sanctuary of hers. When he was finally released from its grip, he lowered her legs and collapsed on top of her.

His Serenity, his mind whispered. *And*, he thought as he drifted, *maybe she was the peace he'd been searching for.*

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

Chapter Two

The *brring brring* of her cell phone interrupted Lynn's hot dream about Boyd and anal sex. She groped the floor next to the bed with half a mind of throwing it against the wall. She had to lean way out over the platform to reach it and as she stretched her leg out for balance, she bumped against something. Hard. Hairy. Definitely a male leg. Holy crap. It wasn't all a dream. Sitting up, she grabbed the phone and snapped it open with a jerk.

"Yeah," she answered it softly. It could only be work her calling at—she squinted at the alarm clock—three in the morning. "Chief Jameson."

Rubbing the back of her neck, she listened to Mrs. Baker, her elderly neighbor a few doors down, report a *ruckus down on her dock*. She grinned. She'd come home to take this chief's job after being burnt out on the big city, but the misdeeds reported to her often made her roll with mirth. Last time Mrs. Baker had reported a late night dock intruder, it turned out to have white rimmed eyes, very sharp claws, and it weighed in at around twenty pounds. The local raccoon population seemed intent on invading her property.

After agreeing to run over and check it out, Lynn closed the phone and looked around for her jeans. Spying them across the room, she hurried over pulled them on and grabbed her discarded sweater. Just in case, she removed her sidearm from the wall safe she'd had specially installed and picked up her boots. Heading for the bed to put them on, she

Loribelle Hunt

tried not to cringe at the memory of her lack of caution. Boyd Graham. What had she been thinking? Hadn't she learned that lesson years ago?

The cause of her wince morphed from memory to reality when she looked up and met his laser sharp gaze. Propped on one arm, with the quilt pooled around his waist, he took her breath. He was masculine perfection. There was no other word for it. He had smooth, olive-toned skin, sculpted abs and pecs, and a chiseled face. His biceps were ringed with tattoos and she'd noticed another one on the back of his neck, some kind of symbol she didn't recognize. They probably weren't gang related; at least, she didn't think so. He was sporting a shaved head these days and he looked dangerous, edgy. He eyed the gun she'd clipped to her waist with distaste. Yeah, given what his last encounter with a weapon had cost him that wasn't a surprise, even if that one was a knife.

"Where are you going?" he asked. Calm. Disconnected.

"Mrs. Baker heard some noise on her dock. I'm gonna walk over and check it out."

Facing away from him, she sat down on the edge of the bed and laced up her boots. He snorted and the platform shifted. She looked over her shoulder to see him getting dressed. Disappointment lanced through her. Then self-recrimination. She was the law in Duluth. She shouldn't be cavorting with ex-cons.

"That old bat still around?" he asked.

She hid a grin. Old bat was the perfect name for Mrs. Baker. Lynn wanted to laugh out loud at the description. The woman had caused her no end of grief. Instead, she stood up and shrugged, pushing her hands into her pockets.

Shoving his feet into his shoes, he stood shirtless, his jeans zipped but unsnapped, and she longed to run her hands across the smooth expanse of his chest. There'd been no chance to explore the changes in him earlier and this interlude had to be over.

They stared at each other. Three feet and a world apart. Silence hung heavy in the room. Uncomfortable, she fidgeted a moment before catching herself. Wait a minute. This was *her* house. *Boyd* was the interloper here.

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

"I need to go." She broke eye contact and strode for the door. "You can see yourself out, all right? Don't lock up."

He grabbed her at the back door, slamming her back against his chest, his arms like a vice around her waist. Leaning close, he nibbled her neck right on the pulse point, a spot that always drove her crazy. Her pussy warmed. *Damn*. She needed to get him out of her system ASAP.

"I have to go," she rasped, hating the sound, hating the weakness in her knees.

He freed her inch by inch, as if afraid she'd run off if he let her go. And she just might.

He kept hold of her hand.

"I'll go with you," he said turning her to meet his gaze. "You didn't think I was done with you, did you?"

His hand dropped to the front of her jeans and she grew wet. She fought to keep her breath even. *Oh please, don't be done*. Her mind flashed to her dream, with his dick buried inside her ass while her butterfly vibrator clung to her clitoris. Her eyelids drooped. She hadn't found a man yet she trusted with that fantasy, yet for someone reason she would let Boyd do that to her. Must be the memory of that long ago night, when he'd been deadly but protective, ensuring she was okay before he let them drag him off. She sighed and opened the door, hiding her reaction to his nearness. And what had she done? Gone and cried to Daddy, who instead of fixing things for Boyd had ruined his life. She'd hate her too, if she were him.

But she didn't say any of that to him now. Instead, she walked out into the cold December night and breathed deeply, willing peace into her soul. Storm clouds had rolled in while they slept and lightened flashed in the distance.

Boyd paused just outside the door.

"Well, let's go then," she said.

He fell into step beside her and they walked quietly down the river path. As she'd expected, Mrs. Baker's dock was lit up like the Fourth of July. Lynn snickered. Wrong season. The porch floodlight was on and she headed for it, shaking her head to signal for Boyd to wait for her down the

Loribelle Hunt

trail. The door to Mrs. Baker's house swung inward when she approached and after determining the woman hadn't heard anything but muffled noise, Lynn made her down to the dock.

Standing on the shore, she looked out into the black murkiness covering the opposite side of the river and stepped out onto the swaying wooden planks. She hated that Boyd was present. The dock was on floating pylons and seemed to sway with every breath she took. Her stomach rolled and she forced herself forward. She'd beat the motion sickness or it would beat her, but she still had a job to do.

At the end of the dock she blinked, not registering what she saw as she fought the churning in her belly. Boyd's hand settled on the small of her back, and although he didn't say a word, she felt...comforted. Focusing, she counted at least three sets of muddy boot prints. She'd have to run back to the house and get her camera. *Damn*. She always carried the small digital gadget in her pocket. Boyd had distracted her.

The sky chose that moment to open up, a freezing deluge falling on them, and cursing her luck she turned and ran. She heard Boyd's footsteps pounding behind her.

All he'd done for the last ten years was read and workout. He could have passed her without breaking a sweat, but the view of her from behind was irresistible. The rain molded her jeans to her thighs like a second skin and the wet denim was almost as sexy as nothing at all. He admired the sleek action of her muscles as her legs pumped, and when they gained her back porch he noticed she wasn't breathing hard either. Reaching around her, he gripped the doorknob and twisted it, crowding through the door behind her.

She sat down at the kitchen table and tugged at her bootlaces while he toed off his shoes and stripped off the rest of his soaking clothes. If they stayed cold and wet, hypothermia could set in quickly.

He leaned against the counter and watched her struggled with her laces until shivers racked her body. Naked, he knelt before her and pushed her hands away, attacking the wet laces with a steak knife. Then he stood them both up and yanked the sweater over her head. She reached for her jeans, but she was trembling so much her hands couldn't grip the

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

zipper. He shoved them away and peeled them off, dropping them in the pile of sodden clothes on the floor and carrying her into the bedroom.

He laid down with her, wrapping them both in the quilt and rubbing his hands up and down her back trying to pass on some of his body heat. She tried to pull away, but he held her tight. She was not warming as fast he'd like, but the shudders had slowed enough so that she could speak without chattering.

"I have to get up, Boyd."

His arms flinched around her.

"I'm okay," she said. "I have to go back out and look around."

"You can put your clothes in the dryer while I'm gone," she added, wiggling free.

She was already hopping into a dry pair of jeans before he reacted. She was just going to blow him off and rush back out into the downpour to see who was hanging out on an old lady's dock? Anger tensed his spine and his hands fisted. Ten years of repressed rage boiled to the surface and he struggled to force it down.

Looking up, she met his gaze and froze.

After a moment she shook it off, finished dressing, and dug around in the closet pulling out a long yellow rain slicker with POLICE emblazoned across the back. He stalked after her and in the kitchen picked up his wet jeans, then dropped them in disgust. There was no way they were going back on. Well, she had to come back here, didn't she? He'd be waiting.

"Um, Boyd," she started.

He looked up to see her shifting on her feet, her head cocked to one side, studying him. She probably thought he'd lost his mind. Not that he cared.

"Are you okay?"

His throat tightened. Damn it, he *wouldn't* care. He nodded. She sighed with a slight shake of her head, obviously not buying it.

"The dryer's in there." She pointed to a set of double doors near the refrigerator. "I won't be long."

A gust of wind and rain blew in when she stepped outside, and

Loribelle Hunt

with a small wave she was gone. He wanted to pace and rant, but years of confinement had instilled in him the economy of motion. Never take four steps when two would work. Never raise your voice. Never show anger. Never feel *anything*. It was all about survival. His survival. And the woman who had to pay for his lost years.

His stomach growled, and emotion hit him like a punch in the gut. Sagging into an uncomfortable wooden chair, he took a good look around. He was sitting in Serenity Jameson's kitchen in his underwear and it wasn't a dream. He was free. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. How many moments would he have like this? When he realized he could move around without bumping into walls, or yell and scream, or fuck the woman that drove him out of his mind?

His belly rumbled again and he walked to her fridge. He could have a snack in the middle of the night. He opened the door and arched an eyebrow. No wonder she was so thin. She had no food. There were some leftovers that looked like science experiments gone wrong, a twelve pack of Diet Coke, an opened bottle of wine, condiments, and buried in the back, an unopened package of sandwich meat and a couple of slices of cheese. He brought them and the mustard out and examined a loaf of bread lying on the counter. It didn't look bad, so he slapped a sandwich together and cleaned up.

The phone rang while he was setting the dryer. Turning, he saw the wireless unit hangin on the wall. He shouldn't answer it. Who would call this late except work or Monroe? His eyes narrowed. The hell with her reputation.

"Hello?"

He grinned at the string of inventive cussing that met his ear.

"What the fuck, Boyd? Haven't you had enough trouble in your life?"

He laughed. "I'm not having a lot of trouble right now, baby brother."

"Shit."

He laughed again.

"What's up Walker?" He squinted at the oven clock. "Why are you

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

calling here at four in the morning?"

He sighed. "Let me talk to Lynn. There's something going on out on the river again."

"She isn't here. Old lady Baker called her out about noise on her dock, so we walked over to have a look. Got drenched, came back here, she changed and went back out."

He waited out the silence from the other end.

"She's out there by herself?" Walker finally said.

What the fuck?

"Is there a reason she shouldn't be? Are we in the *baby-sit cops* business now?" he asked sarcastically.

Again his brother hesitated, and when Walker answered fear snaked up his spine.

"Maybe," Walker answered slowly.

Blinking into the darkness, Boyd rubbed his hand over his shaved head. Needed to take a razor to the stubble later. He snorted. The things you thought about when worry came into play. He hadn't worried about anybody but himself or his brother since...no, don't go there.

"What's going on, Walker?"

"She's not sure." He could hear the shrug in his brother's voice.

"My bet would be smugglers. The Gulf isn't far downstream and Duluth is a small town. Not much police activity."

Smugglers. Just great. Probably drug dealers. Could she handle that? Walker read his mind.

"She was a detective in Birmingham before she came back here. A narc. I'm sure she knows what she's doing."

He smiled. Walker was trying to reassure *him*. How had they ended up so wrapped up in the life of a cop when he hadn't even been around? The cop who'd landed him in prison, no less. It was too rich. Of course, he had to go straight after her when he got out. Predictable. He blinked. Yes, he'd done the expected thing. And what else would people anticipate from him? Maybe he could help her. Find the local action, and how grateful would she be?

With the rain still driving into the roof, he sensed more than heard

Loribelle Hunt

a movement in the back yard. Saying goodbye to his brother, he assured Walker he'd watch his back but he wouldn't make any promises about Serenity. He was sitting facing the door when she came in, shaking off rain. She looked over at him and grimaced.

"Still here, huh?"

She hung the poncho on a hook by the door and sat down at the table. He sensed her withdrawal, and where before it would have pissed him off, now he considered it a challenge. Her expression was closed as she bent to pull off her boots.

"Clothes not dry yet?"

"Nope," he answered, leaning back in the chair. She tensed even more at his *casual-I-belong-in-this-kitchen* pose. Her eyes narrowed.

"Don't get too comfortable," she said.

A slow smile spread across his face.

"Do you ever wonder where you'd be if that night hadn't happened? If Billy Thompson hadn't died?"

He hit pay dirt. She paled.

Standing, he rounded the table and pulled her hard against him.

"I've had ten years to wonder," he whispered. "And the only answer I've ever come up with is inside you."

She held her breath and her chest rose. He couldn't help a look down her shirt. She was a nice round C cup, he guessed. She hadn't bother with a bra before rushing back out and her pink areolas called out to him. He trailed a fingertip along the edge of her top, just grazing her skin, and smiling when goose bumps rose in its wake.

"You've thought about it, too," he said.

"No," she said huskily, shaking her head. "I got on with my life."

He might have bought that if her nipples hadn't gone hard under his palm. He added a gentle squeeze, and she groaned and arched into him. Giving into the temptation, he slid his other hand down her back and cupped her ass. He wanted in there too, and soon. But for now he'd settle for some kind of regular arrangement. One that involved fucking her every way he could think of for the next week.

She shivered and he noticed how cool her skin was under the

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

sweater. He would have noticed earlier if she didn't distract him so much. Lifting her up, he carried her to the bath he'd interrupted when she'd first come home. He sat her on the toilet seat, turned on the shower, and watched her pull off her clothes. Her skin was pimples from the cold and he resisted self-recrimination. He wasn't her keeper, but maybe he shouldn't have let her leave the second time, or should have at least made her warm up right away when she came back. Struggling to hide his reaction to her condition, he dealt with his own garments and stepped under the hot spray.

She hesitated before joining him and years of patient waiting kept him from growling at the delay. He wanted her *now*. Stepping under the water, she tilted her face up, unabashed, and let it sluice over her. His cock did the impossible and got even harder. Her back was to him and he moved in behind her, letting his dick bump her ass. She swayed against him and he repressed a moan.

Sliding his arms around her, he palmed one breast while his fingers delved through the curls hiding her cunt. With a groan she rubbed against him, and her nipple pebbled under his hand. He gave it a gentle twist and was rewarded by her cream coating his fingers. Lifting them to his lips, he sucked one into his mouth, loving her flavor. He wanted more. Stepping back he positioned her with her back against the stall's slick wall. Her eyelids drooped, and she muttered a protest. He knelt in front her, put his hands on her ankles, and slid them up to her thighs, nudging them apart when he reached her pussy.

She glistened with water and her juices, and he leaned forward to lap at them in one long swipe. Groaning, she spread her arms across the wall for support and tilted her hips toward his face. He grinned. She may not like it, but her body was his. The chemistry between them had survived the years and had grown even hotter. Returning to his task, he spread her lips with the fingers of one hand and thrust two from the other deep inside her. His teeth found her clit and she squirmed under his soft bite.

He flicked his tongue over it and thrust his fingers in and out of her in a lazy rhythm. Moaning, she ground her body against his mouth, and

Loribelle Hunt

her thighs tensed around his face. Incredible. She was coming already. He sucked on her clit and she exploded, cream coating his tongue and shudders racking her body. God, he was so turned on he might come before he got inside her.

He reached over the edge of the tub for the foil packet he'd dropped and ripped it open. Sitting back on his thighs, he rolled the condom on and pulled her down on his straining cock. He wouldn't last long. She was so tight around him. It completely jived with his memory of her, the fit of her, that when he leaned his head back and closed his eyes, the fantasy that she'd been waiting for him when he'd walked out through those gates came to life.

He lifted her with ease, plunging in and out of her, grinding against her clit. She clamped down around him and keened with a second orgasm. He came in a rush, out of nowhere, the push over the edge from either the sensation or the sound of her coming, he wasn't sure which. But he was sure of one thing—that it was good.

Serenity relaxed against his chest and he drew slow circles on her back. Her breathing grew even while they sat on the floor of the shower. She dozed and he let her, until the water ran ice cold. Then he nudged her awake and set her aside to turn off the faucet before wrapping her in a towel and leading her into the bedroom.

She dried off, using the towel to squeeze water from her hair before diving under the blankets. She'd lost her mind—it was the only explanation for what was going on here. Whatever that was.

Sex. Just really awesome, screaming good sex.

That was all it was. That little hitch in her chest when Boyd strutted around the bed like he belonged there didn't mean a damned thing. Appreciation for a good-looking guy. That was it. *Yeah, right.*

God, she was in trouble. One day? He'd been back one day and she was going moon-eyed? She rolled over and squeezed her eyes closed, knowing she should kick him out, but unwilling to call an end to the night.

She'd dreamed about him for years, compared other men—decent, law-abiding men—to him for years. It was normal to want to explore that

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

old attraction, right? One night, then he was off limits forever. Duluth had a long memory. She'd been lucky to get the police chief offer and she wasn't going to screw up her career over what amounted to a girlhood crush. Besides, Boyd might be great in the sack, but he was emotionally unavailable. She'd gone to him before he stood trial and he'd been clear in his rebuff—he didn't want to see her or hear from her.

The light clicked off and he climbed into bed next to her, rolling close and pulling her into his arms. She never spent an entire night with a man. Maybe she was emotionally unavailable, too. She hadn't stayed the night with Boyd before either, and was dismayed at how natural it felt. Usually after she slept with a man, she wanted the bed and the house to herself. This time, she wasn't in a hurry to kick him out—and that couldn't be good.

"This can't happen again," she said.

His arms tightened around her and his voice was cold. "You're saying this is a one time thing?"

"It has to be," she said softly. "I like my job. I want to keep it."

He grunted. "I don't care about your job or your reputation. We'll be seeing a lot more of each other."

She sighed. That was impossible.

"We'll work something out," he whispered in her ear.

God help her, she wanted to believe they could. She drifted off to sleep wondering why it felt so right to be with the town bad boy, a man she was partly responsible for sending to prison ten years ago and who it was obvious had very mixed feelings about her. She didn't dare take too close a look at her own.

Loribelle Hunt

Chapter Three

The next few days passed in a blur. Boyd spent his days helping out in his brother's garage and his nights between Serenity's thighs. A surprising number of the old gang showed up. Some to gawk and some who were actually happy to see him. Those fell into two camps, the ones who'd sown their wild oats as kids and were now on the straight and narrow, and the ones who still skirted the law or just ignored it. He was more interested in the second group. For one, he felt more comfortable with them. Yet he also was determined to find out what was going on that consumed so much of Serenity's time and energy. He wanted her all to himself.

That was another concern. The longer he walked around free, the more he considered possible futures, and she always took center stage. Revenge against the woman had been a driving force in his life for so long he'd failed to look beyond it. She was under his skin, and he didn't know how to get her out. He wasn't sure if he wanted to, but she'd been his focus for so long that now that he had her, he couldn't see beyond her. Maybe he'd never seen beyond her.

He was distracted from his thoughts by a car turning in the drive and honking its horn. Walker must be back. Leaning under the hood of his old Camaro, Boyd had an unobstructed view of the front door and nodded when his brother walked into the garage. He caught a glance at the clock over the office door and cursed. Serenity had some Christmas country club thing she had to go that disreputable Boyd Graham wasn't

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

welcome at, but he was hoping for a quickie before she left.

Rushing, he picked up his tools, locked up the car, and jogged to the house to catch a quick shower. Ten minutes later he was walking in her kitchen door. He slowed only long enough to grab one of the beers he'd left in her fridge, then strode into her bedroom and looked around.

A long red dress hung on the back of the closet door and perfume hung in the air. He approached the open bathroom door and leaned against the frame, his arms crossed over his chest. Leaning over the counter, she was applying makeup to her eyelashes with a wand, wearing a red lace bra and panties with thigh high stockings. His cock throbbed at the picture she made and it took all his restraint to keep from tossing her on the bed. She was already late.

He twisted the top off the beer bottle and tossed it into a nearby wastebasket. Taking a long draw, he watched her screw the wand back into its tube and reach for some lipstick. It was a bright shade of red—hell if he knew which one—but when she turned to him, he was sure of its effect on him. With her hair knotted intricately on her head and her face made up, she was sexy as hell. And she had not gone to all this trouble for him.

"Hey," she finally spoke to him.

"Hey."

He didn't reach for her or move out of her way, wishing that just once she'd greet him like she wanted him around. She kept their relationship on a purely sexual level. But that's what he wanted, right?

"I'm really late, Boyd. I need to get dressed."

He stepped back from the doorway and watched her drop the dress over her head and shimmy it down her hips and thighs. A zipper hung open down the back and stepping into high heels, she looked at him over her shoulder.

"Can you zip me up?"

"Sure."

Drawing her near, he blew a soft breath on the nape of her neck and she shivered in response. After dragging up the zipper, he stepped back and she turned around, smoothing the front of the dress down with

Loribelle Hunt

one hand. She met his gaze and he got his first good look at her all put together. Beautiful. He reached for her, the hell with her being late, just as the front doorbell chimed.

Stepping back, she crossed her arms low across her waist. Her expression closed up and the silence between them stretched. The door rang again. No one had ever accused him of being stupid. She had a date. He turned and stalked toward the front door, but she caught up to him before he could open it.

"This was set up weeks ago," she said. "I couldn't cancel it."

She waved her hand in the air between them. "This thing with us...I don't know what this is. But I had a life before you showed up and I'll have one when you leave."

"Who says I'm leaving?" He gripped the back of her neck and hauled her close. Leaning over he said softly, "You're mine."

The doorbell rang a third time and without releasing her, he yanked it open—and in waltzed Tim Monroe. He arched any eyebrow at the scene in the entryway, and an icy rage moved through Boyd. His hands fisted. He wanted to wipe the smirk off Monroe's face. Lynn broke free of him and set a hand over his heart, her eyes demanding silence.

She turned to her date and smiled. "Give us a minute, Tim, please."

Dragging Boyd from the room, she pulled him into the bedroom and shut the door behind them. Then she rounded on him, her eyes shooting sparks as she poked her finger in his chest. If he weren't so angry, he would have laughed at her attempt to push him around. It was kind of cute. Instead, he took a step back and set his hands on his hips.

"You could have canceled this," he said coldly.

Her eyes narrowed. "Maybe I didn't want to. Maybe I have reasons that have nothing to do with you."

His gut twisted. If keeping the date wasn't a reflection of how she felt about him, then it had to be work related. Monroe had been the worst of the worst in a bad crowd ten years ago, but he'd never been busted for anything major and as the town's only rich kid had never received anything more than a slap on the wrist. It looked like he'd led a charmed life since then, straightening up and turning his family's failing business

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

around. Boyd didn't buy it. Someone that bent didn't go clean. Serenity wasn't part of the old crowd, though. She wouldn't know half the details he did.

"Explain it, then," he said.

She rolled her eyes. "I don't have time for this. I'll answer your questions later."

"Not good enough, Serenity." He shook her shoulders. "Monroe may look pretty, but there's no way he's clean."

Stiffening, she broke free and moved away. "Believe it or not, I know that."

Monroe called out from the other room. "Um, Lynn? I hate to rush you, but we're late."

She shuddered. "He gives me the creeps. We can talk later. If you're still around."

"Oh, I'll be here." His gaze raked her from head to toe. He still wanted that quickie and something not so fast.

She yanked the door open and stalked into the living room where Monroe waited. Hands in his pockets, he stood beside the door as if he had all the time in the world. Boyd wanted to smash his face in, but maybe a demonstration would be more effective. Without saying a word, he picked up Serenity's coat off the couch and helped her shrug into it. Then he stepped around her and buttoned it up.

She fidgeted in the silence and when the task was completed, he took her face in the palm of his hands and kissed her. It was a slow deep kiss and he poured all his conflicting emotions into it—his possessiveness, anger, and desire. It only lasted a moment, but it left them both breathless and when he looked up and met Monroe's gaze, he knew his message had been delivered. *My woman. Back off.*

"I'll be here when you get back," he said just loudly enough to be sure Monroe heard. "Call if you need anything."

Looking dazed, she nodded and followed Monroe out the door. Jaw clenched, he watched from the open doorway until the car's taillights disappeared down the road. Then he stepped outside and swung the door shut. He needed to talk to his brother. Walker may have gone straight, but

Loribelle Hunt

he still knew where the dirt was around town.

Boyd's walk to the garage was quick. He found Walker under the hood of an old Chevy. He made enough noise that Walker heard him coming and peaked out.

"Almost done here," he said.

"Take your time," Boyd answered. "I'll go grab us a drink."

He jogged over to the house. He'd left his full beer on Serenity's dresser so he grabbed two new ones and returned to the garage. Walker closed the car's hood and washed his hands in the office sink. When he came back out, he took the beer Boyd offered him and twisted off the top. Leaning against a worktop, he looked his brother up and down.

"All right. What gives, man? You look like you're trying really hard not to look pissed."

He shrugged. "Serenity's out on a date. Or maybe it's not a date. Hell if I know what it is, but it's with Tim Monroe."

Forcing his grip on the bottle to loosen, he rolled his shoulders and watched Walker tense up. Yep, his first suspicion wasn't all wrong.

"You watched her while I was gone," he said casually.

Walker set down his beer and started putting away his tools.

"I kept up with what she was doing." He shrugged. "We both lived in Birmingham years ago when she first joined the police department and I was on a fast track to nowhere. We got to be good friends, odd as that seems."

"How good?" Boyd asked softly. *Have you fucked her?* He couldn't bring himself to ask.

He met Walker's gaze and saw longing there. Turning and gripping the workbench, he closed his eyes, surprised at the quick shaft of pain. Serenity had been with his brother? Anger and confusion warred within him. His jaw clenched and he straightened, fighting the urge to pound on Walker. He wouldn't let a woman come between them, but he was damned if he'd share her.

"How good was it?" he asked again.

Walker snorted. "Why don't you just ask me what you really want to know?"

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

Boyd's eyes narrowed. "Okay. Have you fucked her?"

"Jesus. I can't believe you'd think that." He rubbed a hand over his head. "No. I wouldn't. She's not mine. Never was."

The relief inside Boyd was so strong he could only nod in response. Walker took a long drink of his beer and continued.

"I moved up there after your trial." He grunted. "At first I told myself it was because I had to get away from here, ya know? But I think really it was because I wanted to make her as miserable as she had us."

He paused a long moment, staring into the past. "She was pretty miserable without my help. She was about the last person I'd expect to go to the police academy. The trial changed us all, I guess. Anyway, she grows on you."

He met Boyd's gaze again before continuing. It was as if now that they were talking about it, he wanted to get it all out.

"I stayed and watched her for a couple of years. First because I hated her, and later because I knew, even if you didn't, that you loved her. When I was sure she was going to be okay, I came home. She's good at what she does, and this town never stopped talking about her. Or that night. It was easy enough to keep up with what she was doing."

Boyd didn't hear anything past *you loved her*. Did he? Then or now? He thought he'd strangled the life out of whatever he'd felt for her when she dropped off the face of the earth. Now he wanted to keep it strictly about sex, wanted to make her need him and then cut her out of his life the way she'd done him. Except their relationship was already complicated as hell. He didn't think he was going to be able to let her go, but he was an ex-con and she was a cop. The police chief, for fuck's sake.

He shook himself free from that train of thought and turned his attention to something he was better prepared to deal with.

"Tell me about Monroe," he demanded.

Walker sighed and tossed the empty bottle in the trashcan. "I need another one for that. Let's go to the house."

They were silent on the short walk up the hill, and Walker went straight to the refrigerator when they arrived. Boyd flipped a kitchen chair around and sat with his arms crossed over the back, waiting.

Loribelle Hunt

"Monroe's dirty."

Boyd snorted. "Tell me something I don't know, little brother."

Walker smiled slightly. "No one can catch him at anything illegal and most of the good people of Duluth think he walks on water."

"Tell me something I *don't* know, I said."

"Okay. About a week and a half ago, a couple of kids found ten thousand dollars cash down on the riverbank near Mrs. Baker's dock."

Boyd reached for Walker's beer and took a long drink.

"Got your attention, huh?"

He nodded once. "Go on."

Walker shrugged. "There really isn't more. That's the problem. We live on a quiet little cove, but there's been a lot of unexplained night activity. You know that already. The money. A lot more drug activity than usual."

He paused. "Then there's Monroe and his squeaky clean image. You and I both know that's a crock. His dad almost bankrupted them before good ole Tim took over and turned their business around in a year. He started out building warehouses down on the bay. He's building condos down on the beach now."

"Not much to go on there."

Walker fidgeted, and he knew there was more. Something he was really not going to like hearing.

"Remember Magee?"

"Shrimpy little kid used to hang out with Monroe?"

Walker snorted. "Yeah. Well, he went to work for Monroe, on one of his construction crews. Couple of months ago, he called Lynn and told her he needed to talk to her about Monroe's business. Set up a secret meeting and everything. He never showed up. No one's seen him since, actually."

Great. Walker's story had just gone from weird lights and found money—harmless enough—to missing people. Lowlife people, but still. What the hell was Serenity getting mixed up in? *And, my God, I let her go out with him.* He made a quick decision and grabbed the Camaro keys off the board on the wall.

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

"Wait. Where are you going?" Walker asked.

He didn't really know. He couldn't just walk into the country club. They'd never let him in. The place was surrounded by woods, though. He could get close enough to see her, at least.

"To make sure she's okay. Don't worry, no one will see me."

"Shit. At least take the phone." Walker handed him his cell phone and he absent-mindedly admired it before tucking it in his pocket. He was walking through the front room when he heard Walker call out behind him, "Watch your back!"

He laughed.

"Always do, kid," he whispered. "I always do."

Loribelle Hunt

Chapter Four

Parking the car in a wooded area off the country club's maintenance road, he grabbed a jacket from the backseat, got out and looked around. The club had left it undeveloped, probably in an attempt at privacy, but the roadside was littered with beer cans and cigarette butts. Still used the same by the locals.

He threaded his way through half a mile of dead undergrowth and tall pines to stand in the wood line and observe the back of the brightly lit ballroom. It was housed in the club's main building, an old mansion built to look like Tara in *Gone with the Wind*. It had been remodeled so many times over the years that only the front still resembled the mythical Southern house. The back wall was all glass—with French doors and six-foot windows. The work on them had just started when he went to prison.

White and red Christmas lights framed the doors and a tall tree stood in the middle of the deck. He could see several smaller trees inside. Despite the lighting, there were deep shadows outside the windows. He picked his way through the shadows until he found a spot close enough to see inside.

A band played at the far end on a dais, and the dance floor was packed with couples moving softly to a slow beat. Others lounged at circular tables around the edge. He searched the crowd for Serenity, and was surprised at the changes to many familiar faces. He'd avoided going into town, so the only people he'd seen since returning had sought him out. Here was the cream of Duluth and many of them had not aged well.

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

He got a certain gloating thrill from that. He may have been in prison, but he'd at least taken care of himself.

He finally spotted her in the middle of floor. She took his breath away. She was a woman who'd definitely taken care of herself. *His woman*. Smiling up at Monroe. Before all was said and done, he'd punch that smug son of bitch. His eyes narrowed. And he'd have just cause. Each time Monroe tried to pull Serenity closer and she took a subtle step away, he added another infraction to a growing list. It would be much more satisfying to deal with Monroe's transgressions than his rage against Serenity. She was another matter.

He had thought that whatever possessive or jealous instincts he had were beat out of him ten years ago, but he was wrong. It was one thing to consider her his, which he did—so sue him. But the fine rage that thrummed through him whenever anyone else dared touch her was dangerous. He knew what he was, and what he was capable of doing. And still he stood and watched, letting it build within him.

She'd have to pay for testing his patience like this. The question was how. Because this depth of feeling went way beyond hormones, beyond want. Standing there in the shadows, he realized he was never going to get her out of his system. His brother was right—he loved her. He closed his eyes and leaned against the wall. Ten years. He'd thought he was waiting for revenge, but he had really been waiting for her. It pissed him off that he'd chosen to love a woman who was so wrong for him, and that she didn't love him back. Too damned bad. He stared out into the night. He wasn't letting her go.

He sighed. The job was a problem. He might have to actually go straight. Not that any other good opportunities had cropped up, yet the garage was solvent enough to support him and Walker if need be.

He straightened and turned back to the doors, all the while indulging in a brief fantasy of going in and dragging her out. He might have done it an hour ago, but now he had too much to consider. As much as he hated to admit it, he didn't want to trash her reputation. Plus, he knew she was with Monroe trying to get dirt on him. He was all for that. And she was a cop. A good cop. The litany replayed itself over and over

Loribelle Hunt

inside his head. Whether he was trying to convince himself she was safe or that good cops really existed, he wasn't sure.

While he was thinking about their future, the dance broke up and Serenity moved to a set of doors a few feet from where he stood. She turned and stared out wistfully into the night, and she jumped a little when Monroe came up behind her holding a cup in one hand. She must have seen his other hand reaching for her ass in the glass' reflection, because with a deft movement, she stepped sideways and took the drink. Boyd smiled. *That's my girl.*

The move positioned her so she had a clear view of both of Monroe's hands, and Boyd got a good look at her face. She hid it well, but her eyes were tight with anger. He waffled between going after her and letting her handle it, when she took the choice away from him. She stopped a passing waiter, handed him the cup, and opened the door. He heard her speak to Tim.

"It's fine really. I just need to clear my head a minute—because of all the smoke—and you said you want to catch the mayor before he leaves. I'll only be a second."

She stepped through the door and closed it behind her with a firm tug. Then she wandered over to look at the Christmas tree in the middle of the deck. She circled it, and Boyd met her on the backside of it, pulling her against him and kissing her hard before she could say anything. She struggled a moment before grabbing the edges of his coat and pulling him closer. He softened the bruising kiss.

When he finally loosened his hold on her, she didn't pull away but leaned back to look up at him. She arched an eyebrow.

"What are you doing here?"

"Checking up on what's mine. Monroe needs to keep his hands to himself. You'd better remind him of that, Chief."

It was more a growl than a statement. His eyes flashed at her, and his face was sharply profiled in the white and red glow of the Christmas lights. He obviously meant what he said and since she agreed with him—that touchy feely crap gave her a major case of the icks—she nodded in agreement. Not that she was going to let him push her around either. No

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

way. But she understood where he was coming from. Maybe. Could be she didn't have a clue. She'd have to catch up with Walker soon and interrogate him about Boyd. In the meantime, she intended to keep her work life separate from her personal life. Monroe was work. Boyd was definitely not.

"He is pretty creepy," she said. "I'm not getting any information out of him, so I'll be going home soon. I think I've done my family duty tonight."

She'd come to the party mainly because Mom expected her to, and she would understand Lynn's wanting to cut out early. She was the only one in the room who agreed with Lynn on Tim's creep status. She also knew something was up with Lynn and had subtly questioned her all night. Certain it had something to do with a man other than Monroe, she seemed determined to get answers.

Lynn stifled a groan. There was no telling how Joanne would react once she found out Boyd was back...and that Lynn was sleeping with him. Since her father had died and was no longer around to control their lives or behavior, her mom had gone the eccentric Southern lady route. But even she had limits.

Out of view on the other side of the tree, the door creaked opened.

"Lynn?" Tim called out. She heard his steps on the flagstone path and jerked away from Boyd.

"Go," she mouthed to him. She turned and walked around the tree.

"I'm here." She walked past him to the door and reached for the knob before he could get it. "I was just getting a good view of the tree. Nice job this year, huh?"

She plastered a fake smile on her face and looked up at him. He was looking at the yard, his brow creased in puzzlement.

"What is it?" she asked, trying to remain nonchalant.

He shook his head. "Nothing. Thought I saw someone, but it must have been a shadow."

Or Boyd Graham. But he didn't need to know that. She had an overwhelming urge to leave the party immediately, knowing he'd be waiting for her at home. She suspected Monroe wasn't safe as long as she

Loribelle Hunt

was with him, and she'd hate like hell to have to send Boyd back to prison for beating him up...or worse.

She smothered yawn. It had been a long day and Christmas only was three days away. She'd dragged her tree and ornaments out of storage earlier in the day in hopes she'd get it up tonight, but she really just wanted to fall into bed. She'd do it tomorrow, when she was off and could take care of that and her shopping, along with her mother's twenty questions.

Monroe was silent beside her as they walked through the ballroom. She was looking for her mother, and he was what? Following her? In the back of the room, she saw Joanne deep in conversation with Mrs. Baker and suppressed a groan. Not tonight. Please. She stopped and looked up at Tim.

"I'm beat. I need to say good-bye to my mother, and then if you're ready, I'd like to head home. I can call someone to come get me if you aren't."

He grinned and looked past her. "One more dance, and then maybe your mom will be free."

She laughed. "Okay. One more, and then really, I need to go."

He talked about work and she led the conversation around to Magee. A week after Magee had disappeared, Monroe said Magee had called him from Mexico claiming he was fed up with his life and was starting over. Magee's wife claimed that was a crock. Lynn agreed, since she was supposed to meet the man the same day he went missing.

"Heard from Magee again?" she asked.

"No," he answered, sounding concerned. "I hope nothing happened to him. Mexico can be a dangerous place."

"Hmm," she replied. A non-comment. "I'd like to talk to the guys he worked with again."

"Sure. We're working a half-day on Christmas Eve at headquarters, and will be having a lunch around eleven. Why don't you stop by?"

"I think I will. Thanks."

The dance ended and Lynn couldn't pull away from him fast enough. She sighed when she saw her mom still in deep conversation with

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

Mrs. Baker.

"Let's just go," he said.

"No, I can't. I'll make it quick, I promise."

It took twenty minutes for her to extract herself from the combined clutches of Joanna and Mrs. Baker. Tim, the rat, made himself scarce during their exchange. She tried to hurry it along, imagining Boyd sitting alone at her house with his a slow burning fuse, but it was a waste of time. When she finally settled herself into Monroe's car, she was ready to scream.

Thank God it was a short drive home. She jumped out of the vehicle before Monroe even had it in park. She leaned in the door as he reached for the ignition key.

"Oh, don't get out. I can see myself in." She smiled. "It was a fun night. I'll see you in a couple of days, okay?"

He laughed.

"Boyd doesn't want me around, huh? So I guess you've made your decision. You know, you can't keep your relationship with him a secret for very long, Lynn." He sound sympathetic, but she didn't buy it. She just shrugged in response and he sighed. "Okay, okay. I'll butt out. Just be careful."

She forced a smile. "I always am."

She slammed the door, turned, and walked up the front door. Monroe waited while the door opened. Boyd stepped out and leaned against the frame, his hands shoved deep into his pockets. The car idled at the curb behind her and she wondered how far the pissing match might end up going. She *so* didn't need this crap. Boyd slung an arm over her shoulder when she reached him and they walked inside the house together. Peeking out the door as it slammed, she saw Monroe drive off down the street.

Glad to be home, she off kicked her shoes and reached for the pins holding up her hair. It tumbled down her back and she massaged her scalp as she walked to the bedroom. Boyd followed. She sensed him, but he did it without making a sound. Stopping near the bed, she gathered her hair to one side.

Loribelle Hunt

“Can you get this zipper?”

It slid down, the noise loud in the tomblike silence of the room. She let the dress fall forward to pool around her waist and instead of pushing it down over her hips, she reached behind her for the snap to her bra and took it off with a sigh of relief. Rolling her neck, she wondered what the night had in store for her. She was ready to crash, but as usual her body strummed with awareness of Boyd standing nearby, watching her. She didn't know how she'd lived ten years without him. Addicted, that's what she was—and it wasn't a good thing.

She pushed the dress down and sat on the edge of the bed to roll off her stockings. He leaned against the wall, his gaze like a hot caress. Last, she removed her thong and crawled under the covers. Sleep and lust both tugged at her and right now, sleep was winning. Her eyelids drooped and she curled onto her side to admire him as he undressed. His shirt came off to reveal defined pecs and a ridged abdomen. Dropping the garment to the floor, he reached for the snap on his jeans. She held her breath when they slid down over his narrow hips. He was beautiful, all lean sculpted muscle.

He lay down facing her and held her gaze a long moment before speaking.

“Do you trust me?” he asked. It was the last thing she had expected to hear from him, and it raised her guard. Did she *trust* him? She was beginning to think she couldn't live without him, but that could hardly be counted as trust. Years ago she was sure she had loved him, and where had it gotten her? She knew he would never physically hurt her, and he might even protect if necessary. Yet she knew he wasn't asking for that kind of trust. Did she dare trust him with her heart? With her *soul*, which made her who she was? Could he be trusted not to shove her out of his life again on a whim? Never mind if it was wise to find herself in this situation a second time. The answer to that question was obvious. She couldn't say the same for the one about trust.

She shouldn't take this step. She should say no and let the moment pass, but something hovered in his eyes. Something that looked like hurt and insecurity and longing. Something she couldn't deny. They were so

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

wrong for each other. Maybe what she saw in his eyes was only wishful thinking on her part. If she allowed herself to trust him, it would probably be the biggest mistake of her life.

Still, she nodded. "Yes."

He expelled a sigh. "Say it. Say you trust me."

"I trust you, Boyd." Her arms circled his neck and she pressed her body to his.

"I need to know that you are...completely mine. I want to do something."

"What?" She arched her eyebrows. Where was this going?

He leaned over the side of the bed and picked up her handcuffs, dangling them over her from one finger. A combination of unease and interest moved through her. She was certain he didn't want her handcuffing *him*, and she didn't want that anyway. Her last memory was of him cuffed. But to let him handcuff her? He leaned over her.

"It's a matter of trust," he whispered in her ear.

The soft drawl of his voice sent shivers up her spine, and she pondered the idea. She was turned on, no doubt about it. But it did come down to trust. She made a split second decision.

"Okay."

A slow smile spread across his face. He leaned over and nibbled her bottom lip.

"You have an interesting collection in this drawer over here."

Uh oh. He'd found her toys. Between them, the handcuffs, and the lascivious look in his eye, she knew she was in for a long night. Before she could think of a way to postpone it, he clicked the metal circles on her wrists. They were loose enough not to pinch and didn't tighten when she wiggled. She blinked. These weren't hers. He'd found a play set.

He rolled on top of her, stretched her hands above her head, and secured them to the bed. She craned her head backwards and saw he'd tied two scarves together, which were probably secured to the platform's feet, and he'd used one in the center to go around the cuffs. She grinned.

"Awfully cocky aren't you? How did you know I'd say yes?"

Sitting back on his heels, he admired his handiwork and shrugged.

Loribelle Hunt

"I didn't. I counted on our chemistry."

"Ahh," she answered, not sure what to make of that reply.

He didn't give her a chance to think about it. He leaned close and his lips and teeth closed over her nipple in a semi-hard bite. The restraints had more than enough give in them for her to arch into his mouth, and he broke away with a warning look. "I can make it tighter."

She pressed her lips together to keep from making a smart-ass remark along the lines of *go for it*. She nodded okay instead. He lay down again, pressed into her side, and held her eyes while his hands traveled down her body. She forced her limbs to be still, until his fingers nudged her thighs wide and spread her lips. She squeezed her eyes shut tight and gasped when he grazed her clit and dipped into her pussy. He gathered the moistness there and circled her clitoris, lightly, teasing her by avoiding the touch that would make her come.

His lips again closed over one hard nipple and she groaned when he sucked it, hard. He shifted, his hand left her pussy for a moment, and then she felt something nudge past her inner folds. The vibrator buzzed through the room when he switched it on, and she jerked as the shock of sensation sent her swirling into an orgasm.

When she settled back to earth, she looked at him from beneath droopy eyelids. He was tracing patterns across her belly, his face tense and predatory. From self-control?

"How do you do that to me?" she murmured dreamily, her eyes sliding shut. "No one else has ever been able to get me off like that."

He stilled and her eyes snapped open. *Brilliant, Lynn. Think before you open your big mouth next time.*

He held her gaze and the path his fingers trailed finally registered. He was writing. *Mine*. Over and over again. She held her breath and waited for him to respond to her stupid slip. He'd been in prison and she'd tried to...what? Replace him? The things he could do to her body, at least. It hadn't been long before she'd given up on finding another man like him, and frustrated with her search, had discovered sex toys. They didn't demand emotional entanglement.

"Maybe no one else was able to satisfy you because you were

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

meant for me,” he answered.

His voice was hard, but quiet, and a frisson of unease traveled up her spine. Dipping a hand between her thighs, he removed the now silent vibrator from her body and let his fingers skim her clit. Against her will, her body arched into his hand and he smiled, pinching the hard nub a little too hard. Releasing her, he leaned forward in slow motion and his lips grazed hers. He stared into her eyes and started a light rub across her clitoris. Her breath quickened and her body jumped in response to his touch.

“You’re mine,” he whispered. “My *serenity*.”

Was he using her name, or saying she gave him peace? He slid down her body, nipping and licking and kissing her inflamed skin as he went, and she couldn’t hang on to the thought. Hell, when his mouth closed over her clit, she *forgot* her name. Who could think of anything but pure feeling with him sucking her?

Boyd spread her thighs wide to accommodate his broad shoulders, leaving her open for his exploration. Stopping long enough to grab a pillow he’d left waiting at the end of the bed, he lifted her hips and slid it under her butt. He paused a moment to admire her position, then reached to the floor for the other things he’d left there—a round clitoral vibrator, a condom, and a tube of lubricant. Enough fantasy. It was about time for action.

She was riding so high it would be easy to keep her coming all night. He intended to keep her like that so she wouldn’t protest when he asked to fuck her ass. That would be the ultimate show of trust, wouldn’t it?

Moving back into position between her thighs, he rested on his elbows and inhaled her scent. Musky and sweet, it made him wild for release, but that would have to wait. He pushed his tongue into her cunt, fucking her with it while he flicked her clit with one finger. He drove her to another orgasm and then another, demanding she give him everything. Shaking in the aftermath, she lay limp on the bed, smiling up at the ceiling. He decided it was time.

He pushed the small vibrating ball inside her pussy and turned it

Loribelle Hunt

to low. She half groaned, half chuckled.

"I don't think I can take anymore," she said looking down the length of her body at him. Her eyebrows arched at the tube of lubricant in his hand. He dropped a few beads on the tip of one finger and pressed it into her ass, up to one knuckle, and then two, until it was buried inside her as far as he could reach.

"Maybe one more time," she gasped when he slid a second finger into her and slowly began to fuck her, loosening her resistant muscles. He could feel her body tensing to come again and he stopped. He ripped open the foil condom pouch with shaking fingers, rolled it condom on, and picked up the lube. He coated her tiny hole again and then the head of his cock, and moved into position. His hands caught the sides of her face and he met her gaze.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

She stared at him before nodding.

"Yes," she whispered.

He kissed her hard and fast, and then edged into her tight opening. *Ah Christ*. He wouldn't survive it and he was only in a little bit. Pushing in another couple of inches, she tensed, resisting him.

He reached up and popped the release on the cuffs and her hands flew down to grip his shoulders.

"I trust you, Boyd, okay? But I don't think this is going to work," she panted.

"Shh, baby, you have to relax. It'll work. We'll go slow."

He fought the urge to just plunge into her. He didn't want to hurt her. Hell no. Then she'd never let him do this again. And he had to do it again. He reached for the vibe control and kicked up the speed. It rested against her G spot and she softened in response to the additional stimulation. His cock slid in a little farther. Squeezing his eyes shut, he counted to ten. Almost there, but she needed a little more. Finding her clit with one hand, he rubbed in hard fast circles. Now her pants were from desire and she was making the soft moaning sounds that told him she was close. She rolled her head back and forth on the pillow and ground her mound against his hands. The movement forced his cock another inch up

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

her ass and she groaned and repeated the movement.

He released a pent up sigh—finally there—and in a long slow drive hilted himself inside her. She tensed up again, and he gritted his teeth at the sensation of her clamping around him.

“Relax, Serenity,” he ordered. “Or I’ll come right now without you.”

He held her gaze as she struggled to comply. When she let go, he thrust in and out of her in long, slow strokes. He wasn’t going to last.

“Now. Come *now*, Serenity,” he grunted.

His balls tightened and the most intense orgasm he’d ever experience ripped through him. She cried out his name and trembled beneath him. When he withdrew minutes later, she moaned a protest, closed her eyes, and curled onto her side. Pausing a moment to trace a line down her waist to her thigh, he stood beside the bed and studied her before turning for the bathroom.

After disposing of the used condom and washing his hands, he gripped the sides of the sink and stared hard at his reflection. He hadn’t let himself feel anything for so long, it was hard to identify the emotions racing through him now. Relief. She’d given herself to him completely. The trust he needed from her. Want for her had always burned in his blood, and that was easy enough to name. But the hope...his chin dropped to his chest and he took a deep breath. Hope was dangerous.

Straightening away from the sink, he hit the light switch and walked back into the bedroom. Her breathing was deep and easy, and he knew she was already asleep. He crawled into bed beside her and tugged the quilt over both of them. Arms crossed under his neck, he stared up unseeing at the ceiling. They had to talk. Soon. The years he hadn’t heard from her weighed on him and he wanted an explanation. And then there was the future. She rolled over, rested her head on his shoulder, and threw one leg across his. His arms came down around her, holding her tight, and he closed his eyes. Tomorrow. He’d bring it up tomorrow.

Loribelle Hunt

Chapter Five

Lynn woke the next morning to the sound of Christmas music and the smell of fresh coffee. After taking a fast, hot shower, she dragged herself to the kitchen and poured a cup liberally dosed with sugar and milk. A few sips later, her brain started to wake up and she heard voices from the front room. Then she spotted a box of Krispy Kreme donuts on the table. Either Boyd had already been out this morning, or the mysterious visitor had brought them. She picked out a chocolate glazed and walked toward the living room. Once she reached her bedroom door, alarm quickened her pace. That wasn't just any voice. Joanne had decided to visit.

She laughed at something Boyd murmured, and Lynn froze when she stepped into the room. They were a study in contrast. Mom was petite and perfectly made up as usual, in designer slacks and a sweater and Boyd was tall, broad, and rough looking, his bald head needing a fresh shave. He'd put up the artificial tree (she couldn't imagine Mom had done it) and draped it in multi-colored lights, and they stood in front of it arguing over what ornament should go where.

She could only see his profile, but Boyd looked relaxed and at ease like a man who enjoyed a good relationship with his girlfriend's mother. Joanne must approve. She certainly wouldn't hesitate to protest if she didn't.

Lynn walked into the room, took a bite of her donut, and sat down on her creaky couch. At the noise, they both looked at her. Joanne smiled

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

and arched one perfectly sculpted eyebrow; Boyd settled his hands on his hips and looked her up and down.

"Well, she certainly looks better than she did last night," Joanne said to Boyd.

He nodded. "She does."

"Hmm," Lynn answered. "Maybe because my alarm clock seems to have disappeared."

He grinned.

"I've decided the best thing about being out of Atmore is the fact that I don't have to live on anyone else's schedule."

"That's the best thing?" she asked with a hint of outrage. She blushed. Oh God, she needed to rip out her tongue. She'd said that in front of her mother. What was Boyd doing to her? Joanne just laughed and turned back to the tree.

"I was just telling Boyd how you agonized over finding him the perfect gift that first Christmas he was gone. We must have gone into every store in Birmingham."

She paled and gripped her mug, and finally got the courage to meet Boyd's piercing gaze.

"And I was telling her that I never got it," he said softly.

Lynn could see her mother's smile in profile and knew she'd accomplished whatever goal she'd struck out to reach.

"Look at the time. Y'all finish this up, hear?" She walked over to Lynn and pecked her on the cheek. "I'll be back after my appointment, and then we can go shopping. You didn't forget, did you, sugar?"

Lynn glared at her mother, stood up, and crossed her arms. Like she was in the mood to shop now?

"Boyd's coming with us. We'll have lunch first, I think." She walked to the door and he helped her into her coat. Reaching up, she patted his cheek and murmured, "Such a sweet boy."

Lynn's eyebrows flew up. Boyd? Sweet? In what lifetime?

With a waggle of her fingers and a quick "I'll see you later", Joanne was gone, and Lynn was alone with Boyd. Again.

They stood at opposite ends of the couch and stared at each other.

Loribelle Hunt

He was first to break the silence.

"She never told me about the mysterious present."

Lynn blinked and went to the coat closet. After digging around the top for a minute, she came back with a small box and handed it to him.

"You kept it?" he asked, surprise in his voice.

She shrugged. She really didn't want to talk about that time in her life.

He lifted the lid.

"I had no idea what you might want," she said. She smiled slightly. "You loved that car though."

He smiled and picked up the pewter keychain with the Camaro logo carved into it.

"It's perfect," he said softly. "Why didn't you send it to me?"

Moving to the tree, she picked up an ornament and thought over her answer. She couldn't come up with one that didn't make her sound like a lovelorn sap. He came up behind her and put his hands on her shoulders, moving to lightly massage the nape of her neck. Suppressing a moan of pleasure, she let her head fall forward. After a moment, Boyd turned her around and lifted her chin with one hand.

"Why didn't you?" he asked again.

She sighed. "I don't know. I ruined your life—you wouldn't have been there in the first place if it wasn't for me. And you didn't want anything to do with me. You made that clear the last time I saw you. Remember?"

"Oh Christ," he groaned. "I wanted you there, all right. Every day, every year that I didn't hear from you I hated you a little more. I had this plan to get out and make you suffer."

She leaned her forehead against his chest, cursing herself for being a fool. Of course that made perfect sense. She tried to move away, but his arms clamped around her waist.

She pushed against his chest and glared up at him. "Let me go, Boyd."

"No, Serenity," He laughed. "I don't think so."

"I really hate that name, you know."

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

"Too bad." He grinned. "I like it."

Sobering he added, "I don't think I'm ever going to be ready to let you go. You should start wrapping your mind around that concept."

He tugged her over to the couch and sat down, pulling her into his lap. "Ten years. My hate and your sense of guilt built over the years, and here we are, but hate is the last thing on my mind now."

"You have to decide if you're with me because you still feel guilty, or because of something else," he added softly.

Thinking hard, she stared at the blinking tree lights. Had she loved him then? Did she love him now? Or was guilt pushing her toward him? Well, that and a healthy dose of lust. She changed the subject.

"Where did the lights come from? Mine didn't survive the move. I was going to get some today."

"I picked them up at the grocery store this morning. You know, you have no food. You need to take better care of yourself," he said accusingly.

His hand stroked up and down her back. The motion, which was both soothing and comforting, melted something around her heart and she started to believe. With a heartfelt sigh, she curled into him and let her hands wander over his body. Lazy morning sex was just what she needed.

She gave him a sultry smile and sat up enough to pull the sweatshirt over her head. She wasn't wearing a bra, and his gaze immediately zeroed in on her nipples, which had hardened in the room's cool air. She tugged him forward, and he yanked his shirt over his head and sent it flying across the room.

She straddled his waist, running her hands over his chest. It was broad and smooth, every inch of it well-developed muscle. She leaned over and swirled her tongue over one rigid nipple, and then the other. His hands twisted in her hair, and his groan gave her an idea. After last night's slow torture, he deserved some of his own. Crouching lower, she slid her tongue down the center of body, pausing to dip into his belly button before continuing down.

She moved to the floor between his thighs and reached for the snap on his jeans. He stood up and stripped off both them and his underwear.

Loribelle Hunt

By the time he sat back down, his cock stood at full attention. She looked up to meet his gaze. It was hot and needy.

So, her being on her knees in front of him turned him on. Important information to file away for later. Leaning forward, she licked his shaft from base to tip and down again, until he tugged at her hair and groaned.

“Serenity, for the love of God, I’m dying here.”

She closed her mouth over the head of his cock and held his balls in the palm of her hand. Kneading them, she lightly sucked him until he tried to thrust into her mouth. Opening it, she took him deeper and gripped his length with one hand, bracing herself against the couch with the other. Letting him set the rhythm, she slid her mouth and hand up and down his cock until his breath came in pants and he pulled her up.

“Enough,” he said gruffly, standing and reaching for his jeans.

She pulled hers off as he ripped the foil from the condom. He rolled it on, and then positioned her leaning forward over the back of the couch. Moving in behind her, he thrust deep in one quick motion and built a fast pounding rhythm. She was already slick and when his fingers found her clit and pinched, it was all she needed to come. Her whole body seemed to clench around him, and with a roar he came right after her.

Lying over the back of the couch, she tried to catch her breath. Was it her imagination, or was this getting better? She was so screwed if he decided to take off.

* * * * *

Later, they rode to the mall in Joanne’s car. She chattered all the way, mostly sharing embarrassing stories about Lynn’s childhood. Somehow she ended up in the backseat and at crucial story moments, Boyd would turn and grin at her. He was enjoying it entirely too much.

Once they parked, she jumped out of the car, glad to escape the closed confines and non-stop all-about-Lynn-fest. Her mom was doing a hard sale. Either she really liked Boyd, or she’d decided to get serious about her give-me-grandchildren-now plea.

At the door, the three of them split up and agreed to meet back at

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

the car for lunch. When the Judge died, Lynn and her mother had found both life and Christmas shopping much easier to handle diplomatically. They'd instituted a three gift limit. Most years they waited until a couple of days before Christmas, hit the mall together, and shopped till they dropped. It was one of the highlights of the season for them both.

Lynn had a few people in the department to find something for, her secretary and the dispatchers, she needed gifts for her mom, and something for Boyd and Walker. Years ago, she and Walker had come up with a twenty dollar rule for Christmas presents. Thank God, he was a reader. That made his gift easy.

She went to the bookstore first, forcing herself to find something for him and get out before she wasted the day. Next she went to the bath store and got three gifts—one for each lady in the office, and one for her mom. The other two for Joanne would not be so easy, and she didn't have a clue what to get Boyd.

Wandering back out into the mall, she headed for one of the large department stores and ran into Joanne. She was already loaded down with bags.

"Good grief, Mom. Who are you shopping for this year?"

"Oh, you know," she answered waving a hand in the air. "Friends. Daughters. Boyfriends."

She looped her arm through Lynn's and they ambled on. *Here it comes.* The Boyd interrogation.

"I like him," Joanne said. "He'll stick."

Lynn snorted. "Yeah, Mom. We'll see."

Joanne looked over at her and arched an eyebrow. "That boy's loved you for years, Lynn. He isn't going anywhere."

Surprised at the conviction in her mother's voice, she frowned. "You think? And ten years of silence is proof of his undying love, huh?"

"Yes. It is."

Lynn stopped and pulled her mother out of the flow of traffic.

"Are you nuts, Mom?" Her laugh was teary. "How is that exactly? Because I'm not seeing it."

Joanne grabbed her hand and squeezed it.

Loribelle Hunt

"You come from very different backgrounds. You're a police officer. He's a..."

"Killer?" she asked coldly.

Her mother stepped back and pressed her lips together. "I may have appeared to not be paying attention before your father died, but I know exactly what happened that night."

Lynn sighed. "You're right. That wasn't fair."

They resumed walking.

"The real question is—how do *you* feel about him?"

Lynn pressed her lips together and stared straight ahead. How *did* she feel about Boyd? How far did she dare let herself go?

"I don't know," she said softly. "Am I feeling guilt, or lust, or what? I just don't know right now. A relationship with him would be damned near impossible."

Joanne patted her arm. "The best things always take work, darlin'."

They split up and Lynn hit the perfume counter. She picked up new scents for her and Joanne, and then wandered around looking for something for Boyd. She didn't see anything that struck her as right. When her stomach growled, she checked her watch and decided to head back to the car. Maybe something along the way would catch her eye.

She ran into Boyd halfway back, and smiled. Some people gave him a wide berth, but several women craned their heads to get a better look.

"Hey," she said falling into step beside him.

"Hey," he answered. He had a couple of bags and grinned when she tried to sneak a look, moving them to his other hand.

"What do you want for Christmas, Boyd?" She laughed. "I should have asked you that before we left the house."

He grabbed her hand and brought her knuckles to his lips. His nibble sent shivers down her spine.

"I already have it," he said softly.

"Oh." Her voice caught in her throat and she was saved from saying anything by Joanne's abrupt arrival.

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

Chapter Six

Lynn stepped out of the bathtub and peeked through the door to see Boyd still sleeping, sprawled bare-assed naked across the bed. She grinned. She was definitely getting used to having him around. Hurriedly getting dressed, she dragged a brush through her hair and pulled it back into a ponytail. She had the meeting with Monroe's crew and some last minute Christmas shopping to take care of today. Alone.

She paused at her kitchen door and frowned. Should she leave him a note? Did they have that kind of relationship? She scrawled a 'be back in a bit' note and stuck it on the fridge with a magnet.

She was running behind, but stopped in to see Walker first. Jimmy Richards met her at the door.

"He's in the back, Chief."

She nodded. "Thanks, Jimmy."

She found Walker outside the back door spraying off an old car. Stopping beside him, she crossed her arms over her chest, shivering a little against the winter chill.

"New car?"

He grinned. "My Christmas present to myself. A fifty-seven Bel Air. She ain't much now, but she'll be a beaut when she's restored."

She chuckled at his enthusiasm. The car was a wreck.

"If you say so. Speaking of Christmas, do you have any idea what I should get Boyd? I don't have a clue."

He laughed. "Nope. I'm fixing to go to the mall. Wanna tag along?"

Loribelle Hunt

"I would, but I made arrangements to run out to Monroe's and catch Magee's crew again." She glanced at her watch. "If I don't hurry, I'm going to miss them."

He nodded, looking worried. "Be careful. Monroe's a snake."

She grinned. "I'll be fine."

It was a thirty minute drive to Monroe's business, which was housed in a warehouse farther down the river. She arrived around noon and found only three cars in the parking lot. She parked near the door and went inside to see if any of Magee's crew had waited for her.

The place appeared to be empty and she went around back to the dock. Monroe's boat was at the far end, and she saw him and another man standing in front of it. She waved hello and he motioned for her to come out. Damn. She thought about making them come to her, but it would just take more time. Stepping out onto the dock, she looked around and the nape of her neck tingled. She didn't see anyone behind her, yet she hesitated before continuing. Her sense of unease grew. Reaching behind her, she released the snap on her gun holster and rested her hand on the hilt of her weapon. Sure it was within easy reach, she quickened her pace.

At the end of the dock, she nodded to Monroe. "Did I miss everyone?"

"This is all of us, actually." She heard footsteps behind her and turned to see two men with drawn weapons. "We didn't have anything planned today."

She faced him again to see a small pistol in his hands. She spread her arms.

"What are you doing, Tim? If I had anything on you, I'd have already arrested you."

"Ah, that's true," he said. "You're a cop. You have to play fair."

His tone turned derisive. "But you had to hook up with that lowlife Graham, didn't you? You could have had me, but you chose him."

"That doesn't explain you being armed," She frowned down at the gun in his hand

"Your boy's nosing around. You might play fair, but he won't. And we all know how far he'll go if he thinks he's defending you. I thought

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

he'd come with you today." He shrugged. "If he shows up, I can get rid of you both."

She suppressed a groan and forced a laugh. Please, God, let her get out of this mess before Boyd came looking for her. She had no doubt he would.

"I think you overestimate my hold over him, Tim. He won't come. He just wants revenge for spending ten years in prison."

His grin was crazy. "We'll see."

He motioned to the boat with his gun hand. "Let's get on board, shall we?"

Two of the men climbed onto the boat before her and tied her hands with rope when she gained the deck. She sat on a chair and listened to the four of them argue in low voices about what to do with her. Monroe and one of his associates were all for killing the cop right away. The other two mentioned caution. *Hooray for caution*. They took her gun, but didn't search her. If she could somehow reach the knife in her boot, she could cut her bonds. Except one of them always had an eye on her.

Their argument seemed to last forever, but it couldn't have lasted more than twenty minutes. Finally, one of the men left the boat and stalked down the dock. The other three decided to lock her in a cabin and figure out what to do with her later.

She was marched downstairs and pushed inside a small storage room. Before she could release a sigh of relief, something came down hard on her head. Falling forward, she caught herself with her wrists, preparing to roll and fight. Then she heard the door click shut behind her.

She dug the knife from her boot and sawed through the rope binding her hands. Her head pounded and with ginger fingers, she reached up to feel a knot already forming on the back of her scalp. Her hand came away bloody. *Great*. She leaned back against the wall and tried to regain her equilibrium.

A thud came from outside the door, and she crawled over to peek through the wooden slats. One of the men sat in a chair in the tiny hallway. Queasy and dizzy, Lynn let her eyes slide shut. Her skull pounded, and nausea roiled her stomach. What a time to be afflicted with

Loribelle Hunt

motion sickness. She just needed to rest a minute.

The next time she opened her eyes, the room had grown dim and she heard shouting from the deck. Jerking upright, she groaned and grabbed her head. *Damn. I do not have fucking time for this!*

The guard outside her door was on his feet and at the sound, turned to look at her door. The knob jiggled, and she reached for the closest small object and moved to the wall beside the door. It creaked inward and the man stepped through, whipping his head around to look for her.

The boat rocked, tossing her forward, and she swung her arm at him with all the momentum she could muster. She hit him in the back of the head with a sickening crunch, and finally looked at what she held. A brass lamp base. Fighting off a wave of queasiness—God, she hated boats—she knelt at his side and felt for a pulse. It was weak, but it was there.

Silence descended topside and she made her way up the stairs, blinking against the glare of the sinking sun. Monroe backed against the railing, his hands spread high and it took her moment to pick Boyd out in the gathering gloom.

* * * * *

He had been alone when he'd awakened alone in the bed. Hurrying to the shower, he glanced at the time and wondered where Lynn was. The house was too quiet for her to be somewhere inside. It was four o'clock p.m. by the time he dragged himself to his brother's after staring frustrated at her note in the kitchen long enough to percolate one cup of coffee.

Walker sat in his kitchen wrapping presents. Boyd almost laughed at the scene. This was not something they'd done much as kids. There were no great Christmas memories for the Graham brothers. Walker looked up and grinned.

"Hey, brother. I just got off the phone with Lynn's mother, who apparently by-passed y'all because your phone's off the hook. Little early

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

in the day for that, isn't it? Anyway, she's decided to move Christmas dinner to Lynn's, and we're invited. I don't know what's up with you two, but if I get to eat Joanne Jameson's cooking, I don't care."

Boyd arched an eyebrow. He knew Lynn's mom liked him, but he hadn't realized how much. That was a damned site better than having to worry about her getting used to him.

Walker frowned. "Where's Lynn? I thought we were going to grill over here tonight."

Boyd shook his head. "I don't know. She left a note saying she'd be back later. I figured she was here."

Walker put the paper and tape in a bag and tossed it aside. Reaching for the phone, he looked at Boyd and raised a questioning brow.

"Did you call her?"

"There was no answer." He shrugged. He'd left her a voice mail, and then pushed it out of his mind. That may not have been the best way to go. Walker's expression grew grim.

"She was going out to Monroe's to talk to some of his crew."

A sense of dread filled Boyd. *Monroe, who knew Serenity was investigating him and his business dealings.* He grabbed his keys from the hook by the door and ran out the door, with Walker right on his heels.

He made the thirty minute drive in fifteen. Monroe's building sat on several wooded acres, set far off the road to catch advantage of the river it bordered. The gates were wide open and he drove quickly down the long tree-lined entrance. It opened onto a large parking lot in front of the main building. There were four cars, including Serenity's, in the lot.

Boyd and Walker approached the building and made a silent pass through it. Empty. Where was she? If Monroe had hurt her, he'd take him apart piece by piece. They walked through the back door and saw the boat moored at the end of the dock. Exchanging a short look, they cautiously approached it, moving along the side of the property in the shadows.

Two men stood in the gloom on the deck. While they watched, one walked up the short steps to the captain's chair, while the other moved to the bow. Boyd's blood boiled. Where was Serenity? No one was looking, so they stole on board. He followed Walker on quiet feet, his brother

Loribelle Hunt

going for the guy upstairs while he stalked the one on deck.

Noise erupted above him as he moved in close enough to make out Monroe's profile. He couldn't spare a glance at his brother as he ducked the fist coming at him. In one movement, he grabbed the gun from Monroe's hand and stepped out of his reach.

He shook with rage, and it took him a minute to find his voice.

"Where's Serenity?" he asked in a hard tone.

"How should I know?" Monroe asked, spreading his hands and backing up.

Boyd narrowed his eyes and cocked the hammer. "I don't have a problem killing people, remember? Where is she?"

He caught movement on the edge of his vision, but didn't dare turn to see what it was.

"I'm here," Serenity said.

He said a quick prayer of thanks to a God he hadn't believed in for a very long time. Monroe shifted, and he lifted the gun again.

Serenity came up next to him and held out her hand.

"Give me the gun, Boyd," she said softly.

He felt Walker approach his other side and from the corner of his eye saw him cross his arms and glare at Monroe.

"Why don't you just leave, Serenity, and let us take care of Monroe?"

She said dryly. "Wasn't ten years in prison enough for you?"

"I could shoot him in the knee."

"Hmm," she said, pretending to think it over. He hoped so, at least. "With your record, you'd still do a couple of years for aggravated assault. If not more."

He risked turning his head to meet her gaze and grinned. "But you'll wait for me, right?"

Her eyes narrowed and she put her hands on her hips. She said angrily, "No. No, I will *not*, Boyd. I'm not waiting for anyone anymore. Give me the damned gun!"

He lowered the hammer and let the gun roll over so his hand was off the grip. Then he handed it to her.

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

"Thank you. Walker, see if you can find some rope to tie him up," she asked sweetly, eyeing Monroe. "Let's get him off this boat and inside the building."

Walker got some rope; she went down the ladder first with the gun, followed by Monroe, and the brothers. They marched Monroe into his office and tied him to his chair. Boyd thought it was kind of poetic.

"Now what?" Walker asked.

"I'm about to call a buddy of mine with the state drug team," she said, reaching for her phone. "Then I'll get a search warrant. I certainly have probable cause. Then we'll find out just what old Tim here has been up to."

She called the city judge first, and had one of her officers bring her a warrant. He and Walker stood over Monroe while she did a quick pass through the building. She was grinning when she came back and called her friend. A friend who didn't just work for the state—he ran one of its drug teams. He and his crew showed up in an hour. Boyd had never been into drugs, but having so many cops around made him antsy, especially when Monroe made sure everyone knew he'd just been released from prison and the suspicious looks started.

Serenity went outside with her friend, whom she introduced as Andrew. He was a little too attentive, in Boyd's opinion, and they were gone a long time. He waited and watched the search.

After a while, Serenity and Andrew came back inside. Serenity found him and Walker and pulled them aside.

"I need y'all to give an official statement and then you can get out of here, okay? One of Andrew's guys will do it in the conference room over there." She nodded to a door behind them.

"Fine. What about you?"

"I'll be here awhile. Y'all do this, and then go on home."

She rubbed the back of her neck and winced.

He frowned and stepped towards her.

"I'm fine," she said, her eyes on his face.

"Let me see." He grabbed her arm and spun her around. Ignoring the narcs watching him, he stepped close and lifted her hair. She had a big

Loribelle Hunt

knot on the back of her head. He prodded it gently. Someone had knocked her good. He might just have to kill Monroe after all. She turned around, and he looked her over before she moved away.

"I'm fine," she repeated softly. "And Monroe's in custody in a building full of cops. Don't even think about it."

He nodded, forcing his fists to unclench and his jaw to loosen. God help Monroe if he ever got his hands on him.

An officer approached and asked if they were ready to make their statements, and he nodded.

Serenity met his eyes. "I'll see you later."

He snorted. So, it came down to this. It was okay for her to fuck him, but she didn't want anyone else to know about their relationship. Now that his fear for her had subsided, anger moved in to take its place. To hell with that. He grabbed her hand and yanked her flat against his chest. Then he whispered in her ear.

"I'll go home this time, but I'm not leaving you. You'd better find a way to start explaining me."

Her buddy Andrew came up behind her. Boyd dropped a light kiss on her lips, stood back, and met his gaze.

"She's got a big knot on the back of head," Boyd said. "Make her get it looked at, will you?"

Then he turned on his heel and walked into the room designated for statements and sat down. It brought back unpleasant memories. The last time he'd made a statement to law enforcement, he'd tried to calmly explain to the Chief of Police that the knife that had killed Billy Thompson wasn't his. That he didn't intend to stab anyone with it. That if the moron hadn't taken a swing at his girl, he wouldn't have stepped in the middle of the fight. But none of those explanations had made any difference. The town knew he was bad, that it was just a matter of time before he killed someone, and the judge would be damned if his little girl would end up with the likes of Boyd Graham.

His jaw clenched again. He'd grind his molars to nothing at this rate.

The state agent sat down and watched him for several long

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

moments. Lost in his own thoughts and watching Serenity through the plate glass window, Boyd ignored him. A medic bent over her injury and then moved around to shine a light in her eyes.

"I'm Tony Banks. I've known Lynn a long time. She has a reputation for being frigid and too fair," the agent said. He turned his gaze to meet the man's curious look. "There are very few people she calls friend. I'm guessing you're why we're here, instead of the county."

So, the agent considered this a fishing expedition. Boyd sprawled in the chair and crossed his arms over his chest. "Why are you different from everyone else?"

"Because Andrew's gay." Banks grinned. "And if you repeat that, I'll deny it. Also, I'm...difficult to work with."

"Mmm hmm," Boyd said, not wanting to comment.

"We all got drunk together a few years ago and spilled our guts."

He looked sharply at the agent. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that I have a good idea who you are," Banks said with a shrug. "She did tell me you were getting out of prison last time we spoke, but she seemed pretty conflicted about it."

He glanced out the window into the foyer, and Boyd followed his gaze. Andrew stood looking in at them, with his hands on his hips. "Guess she's made up her mind, though. She wouldn't be handing us such a big case if she hadn't decided *you* were the one worth defending this time."

Now it all started to sink in. The guy wasn't passing judgment on him; he was just scoping him out. And Serenity *had* made her choice. He grinned at Tony.

"Well, let's get this over with. Tomorrow's Christmas, and I still have things to do." He looked back out the window and added softly, "Christmas is for miracles."

* * * * *

The full moon was low in the sky when Lynn pulled into the driveway. Fatigue beat at her and she rested her head on the steering

Loribelle Hunt

wheel for a minute before reaching for her bag and the door handle.

She heard music when she walked into the house, and she followed it to the bedroom. Empty. That meant Boyd was up. She was dying to know what he'd said to Tony that him smirking at her all night. She found him in the bathroom with a straight razor, shaving his scalp.

She shook her head with a grin. He was as vain as a woman who insisted on shaving every day. *Wax people. Wax.* She snickered, thinking of him waxing his head. Oh, that would go over well. He canted his eyes to the side and smiled at her in the mirror.

Walking in behind him, she eyed the tattoo on the nape of his neck and lightly skimmed its outline with her finger. It was a simple black design, like two check marks joined in the middle and placed so one was on bottom and one was reversed on top. It was the only tattoo he'd gotten in prison. The others, he'd had long ago.

"When did you get this?" she asked.

She leaned around him and met his gaze in the glass. He lowered the razor and swished it in the water. Lifting it again, he answered, "About eight years ago."

He dragged the razor over his head.

"What is it?" she asked, exasperated when he didn't continue.

"It's a Celtic Rune. It means defense."

"Ahh," she said, tracing it again. "What put you behind bars in the first place?"

"Yes."

He cleaned the razor and let the water out of the sink. She stepped back while he put everything away, and leaned against the doorframe. Her eyes slid shut. Soon, gentle arms came around her waist.

"Hey," he whispered. "You need to get some sleep."

He led her to the bed and helped her out of her clothes. The alarm clock had been returned and she glanced at it. The time surprised her. It was five o'clock a.m. Where had the night gone? She crawled into bed and snuggled into Boyd's warm arms, and within minutes, she drifted off to sleep.

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

Chapter Seven

Boyd was pouring water in the coffee maker when a soft knock came from the door behind him. Pulling it open, he stood back and watched as Walker and Jimmy, the delinquent he was trying to reform, trooped through it loaded down with bows and bags.

"Moving in?" he joked.

Walker snorted and nodded at the coffee maker. "You gonna finish making that?"

He walked over and flipped the "on" switch while his brother unloaded bags of food and presents. Jimmy set a ham on the counter. A ham? *Oh, right, Christmas dinner.*

He frowned. "I thought Joanne was cooking."

"She is, but it only seemed fair that we do the buying."

"Guess so."

When everything had been either laid out or put away, Jimmy turned to Walker. "You're all set, man. I'm going to take off for a little while."

Boyd gave him a hard look and nodded. "You stay out of trouble, okay?"

Jimmy tried to look injured but ruined it with a grin.

Boyd shook his head. The kid was probably a lost cause.

"I will," he promised, crossing a finger over his chest.

Walker just rolled his eyes. "Go on. Don't call me if you get arrested," he called after the boy before the door banged shut.

Loribelle Hunt

Boyd got two mugs from the drain board and filled them with coffee. He added sugar to his and sat down at the table while Walker took his place. It felt surreal to be here in this kitchen on Christmas Day, with the woman who meant more to him than anyone in the world asleep in the next room and his brother across from him at the table. The room was silent except for the radio softly playing carols, and he relaxed with a sigh.

Of course, Walker had to blow the mood. "Get Lynn anything for Christmas?" he asked casually.

Damn. After the near miss at Monroe's warehouse, he'd blown what little shopping time he had left. "No. I was going to yesterday, but..."

Walker reached for a small box he'd set aside, opened it, and pushed it across the table at Boyd. He stared in surprise at the ring.

"Remember that?"

How could he forget? Their grandmother's ring had been their mother's only prized possession. Before their dad had taken off, she used to keep it hidden so it wouldn't get hocked. It was only cheap costume jewelry, but it had meant the world to her. And Walker had kept it? Bemused, Boyd looked up and met his brother's eyes.

"I got curious about it a couple of years ago and took it to a jeweler. It's real."

Boyd choked on his coffee. Where had it come from, then? Maybe Mom had been right to keep it hidden.

"What is it?" he asked.

"A quarter carat ruby. The band is pure gold." He grinned at Boyd's expression. "Yeah. I was surprised too—especially after thinking it was junk all those years."

Boyd took one long last look at the ring, closed the box, and pushed it back across the table to Walker. He was building up to something—he might need it as a prop.

"You seem pretty serious about Lynn. And pretty much over the whole revenge thing."

"Man, I'm toast." Boyd bit back a laugh. "Yeah, I'd call it serious."

"Maybe you want the ring, then." Walker lifted an eyebrow in

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

question. "Course, it was Grandma's wedding ring, so maybe not."

He froze. Marriage? Did he have the right to ask Serenity to tie herself to an ex con? He reached for the box. She saw beyond that. He saw beyond the cop. And in the end they would be together, married or not, so let the ring symbolize whatever it would.

Walker whipped out some Christmas paper and tape and wrapped it up while Boyd laughed. Was he that predictable?

They joked through the morning, and Joanne showed up after lunch. After being filled in on the day before, she peeked in on Serenity, then put the brothers to work and started cooking. He couldn't remember the last time he'd spent a day laughing and cooking in a kitchen. It felt like family, and after the third time Joanne called one of them son, it started to sink in that it *was* family. *His family.*

A car stopped out front and a door slammed.

"That'll be my sister's girl," Joanne said. "She lives in Atlanta, and she's all alone. I insisted she come down. Be a dear, and go help her with her things, will you Walker?"

"Sure, Joanne," he said, and went out the back door.

"I didn't know you had a sister," Boyd said when they were alone.

She smiled sadly. "Well, she and the judge hated each other on sight. I rarely saw her before he died, and then she died a couple years after him. Lynn and that girl are the only kin I have left. Till someone gives me grandkids, at least," she tacked on with an arch look. He avoided it.

"The judge was a real winner, wasn't he?" he asked darkly.

Her laugh tinkled through the room and she winked. "We're all much better off without him, that's for sure."

He would love to have pursued that line of conversation, but the back door suddenly banged open and a tiny blonde stepped through. Walker trailed her, bags in hand, looking like he'd just been hit with a two by four. He put her bags on the floor and shut the door, and she dropped her purse on the table and walked into Joanne's arms for a long, tight hug.

They separated and Joanne turned to him with her arm around the newcomer's waist. No wonder Walker was shocked into speechlessness.

Loribelle Hunt

She was classically beautiful, with shoulder length pale hair that framed a heart-shaped face with high cheekbones and crystal blue eyes. She smiled up at Boyd and extended her hand.

"You must be Boyd," she said with a firm handshake. "I'm Grace Monroe."

Abruptly remembering an awkward little girl in pigtails, he blinked.

"I see you remember me." She grinned. "I hear you were at the warehouse when my second cousin was arrested yesterday. The slime ball. Couldn't have happened to a better guy."

Serenity coughed from the doorway. Boyd looked up to catch her smile just before she rushed in and she and her cousin gripped each other in a long hug. Stepping back, they looked each other up and down and broke into simultaneous laughter.

"I'm glad you could come," Serenity said.

Grace smiled and blinked at Walker. "Wouldn't have missed it. So much eye candy."

Walker actually blushed and Boyd turned to hide his grin. Serenity walked into his arms and he rested his chin on top of her head. He was almost starting to trust the sense of belonging settling over him.

The cooking was finished in a loud din of gossip and laughter and he kept trying to clear his head, unsure if this day was real or a dream. Had it only been two weeks since he'd been released from prison?

Serenity and Grace set the table and transferred the food onto platters. Joanne handed him a knife and he carved the ham. Dinner was a blur and before he knew it, they were cleaning up the mess they'd made and pushing Joanne into the living room to relax with a glass of wine.

Finally everything was cleaned up and packed away, and the presents were all transferred to the living room. Paper flew as they unwrapped them, one by one.

When nothing else was left, Boyd pulled the box from his pocket and without a word passed it to Serenity. Taking a deep breath, she pulled the paper off and opened the box.

"Is that Lily's wedding ring?" Joanne asked in a surprised tone.

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

“Why, I haven’t seen that in years.”

Serenity looked up and met Boyd’s gaze. Maybe this was a mistake.

“Are you asking me to marry you?” she asked quietly. “Because if you are, I’m saying yes.”

His throat froze. Surely it couldn’t be so easy.

“If you can handle be married to the Chief of Police, that is,” she continued, a challenge in her words.

Unable to find his voice, he reached for the ring and slid it onto her left hand.

“I didn’t get you anything,” she whispered, lifting her hand so the ring could catch the light.

“Yes, you did,” he answered. He smiled down at her before catching her lips in a soul-sucking kiss. The room erupted in applause and he broke away, grinning.

“I love you,” he whispered.

“I know.” She squealed and jumped back when he swatted her ass.

“Wrong answer,” he growled, yanking her back.

She grinned up at him.

“How could I not love the man who came to my rescue not once, but twice? Even if I didn’t need any help the second time.” She grinned. “I love you too, Boyd Graham.”

Loribelle Hunt

Author Bio

A native of the South, is it any wonder Loribelle has a love of story telling? After a few bumps along the way and stints as an Army MP, a waitress, a student, and a wedding photographer this mother of three has turned to writing full time. She is a staff reviewer for Romance Divas and a member of RWA, and is looking forward to her first release with Cobblestone Press this June, Bound By Love.

www.loribellehunt.com

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

Also Available from Cobblestone Press, LLC

Invasion Earth by Loribelle Hunt © 2006

Chapter One

Sergeant Major Laney Bradford stood on a ledge cut into the cliff side watching over the battlefield through binoculars. The valley spread out before her, dust swirling around troops and sending columns into the air. Hazy heat obstructed her field of vision. At least from this lofty position the smells of battle did not assault her: the too old latrines and lingering blood from the night before. The cordite from discharged weapons drifting on the breezy updraft provided a harsh reminder of the carnage.

Things weren't going well. Her army had called for a temporary cease-fire and the enemy, in an odd show of kindness, had granted a small reprieve. Laney snorted. The Delroi were winning and they knew it. The Alliance had managed to hold back the invaders from the mainland for a year, sacrificing outlying territories here and there, but it was a losing battle and everyone knew it.

She studied the enemy's array on the valley floor below. The Alliance's superior numbers mattered little because the Delroi had superior technology. Laney's spies stole it when they could but there was

Loribelle Hunt

no way to put anything in production in time to save the Alliance.

A truck lumbered to the front of the enemy's lines and she watched with interest. *This is new*. She heard the excited murmurs of the others around her. The vehicle's driver and team exited and quickly went to work removing its sides. They removed a tarp from the top to reveal the vehicle's contents. Laney felt more than heard the collective gasp of the crowd around her. Lowering the glasses, she reached for her radio and turned to the man beside her.

While she admired the enemy's ingenuity and wished she could counteract it, dismay was uppermost in her mind. She couldn't even find the energy to be angry. She'd fought too long and too hard to see the Alliance destroyed by their own weapon. Fear added an unaccustomed tremble to her voice.

"General, that's one of ours. We should order a retreat and clear as much of the surrounding area as we can," she said.

He nodded. "They'll want to discuss terms for surrender, not retreat."

She shrugged, the wishes of the Delroi not her immediate concern; she then keyed the mike and sent the order to move out down the chain of command. The Delroi had uncovered an experimental bomb. Called the *Doomsayer*, it gave new vision to the old Roman practice of salting the earth. If detonated, it would poison the land for hundreds of miles, killing everything in its path. A truly horrifying weapon and one that never should have been created. She would do whatever was necessary to dismantle it.

Laney trained the field glasses on the enemy command center on the opposite cliff. While she watched, commotion erupted in their ranks after someone pointed out the Alliance's retreat. A newly arrived general lifted his field glasses, studied the valley floor, and turned them on her.

She bit back a gasp. She had seen this one before, and he was quite the specimen. Tall, at least 6'4 with a broad chest she knew was chiseled under his tunic, he had long golden hair and a hard jaw. A shiver worked down her spine and she shifted under the weight of his gaze across the distance.

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

Snap out of it, Laney. He's the enemy. He was also gorgeous. What could lusting from afar hurt? Her radio crackled to life and interrupted her thoughts. Handing it to the general standing beside her, she continued watching the Delroi general. Like a game of chicken, she refused to look away first.

"Sergeant Major," a low voice called behind her. She slowly lowered the binoculars and turned.

"Yes?" She sized up the circle of generals, noting her old friend, General Bob Darren, at the center.

"They sent a message and a radio frequency. You're on," Bob said, his face solemn.

She reached for the radio and turned back to face the enemy command center, glasses zeroing in on the blond. *He's still watching.* As she stared, he lifted a corresponding radio to his lips. Hers now had the proper frequency and a gravelly voice came over it. *His voice.*

"Are you ready to discuss terms?"

Laney took a deep breath. "Yes. First, we want to disburse these armies and secure that weapon."

"It will take several days to clear this area."

His tone was low and commanding. There was something indefinable in it, something that made her heart thump and her knees a little weak. With a mental nudge, she shook it off.

"Yes," she answered. "Days which will give us time to find a neutral location for talks and our leaders to join us." She thought he would refuse, but after several minutes, he nodded.

"We will secure your weapon and make arrangements for talks on one of our ships in three days time."

The generals around her murmured their agreement. "Fine." She finally lowered the binoculars, handed the radio to one of the junior aides to make the arrangements, and escaped the area. The enemy general's rough voice still seemed to slide over her skin, electrifying nerve endings that had held no life since her husband's death years ago. She felt an unaccustomed wetness between her legs and hurried to her quarters. Of all the damned luck, her libido came back to life for one of *them*. The

Loribelle Hunt

enemy.

Once inside the small space, she headed through the cramped living area and into the tiny shower enclosure. A small, vain privilege of rank perhaps, but she had never felt gladder of it. Hurriedly, she stripped her uniform and boots off, reaching in to turn on the spray. She let the hot water wash the grime from her body while her hands traveled its length. She felt desperate for an orgasm, a longing she hadn't felt in years.

Eyes closed, she reached for her nipples, imagining the enemy general's big hands pinching the distended flesh, providing just enough pain to make it pleasurable. She squeezed and flicked at the hard tips, her breath coming in gasps. It wasn't nearly enough stimulation. One hand snuck between her legs. Her pussy creamed and she imagined him licking at it, eating her until she came, and then plunging his cock into her. She wanted him fast and hard and stroked her clit as the fantasy gained momentum. She came with a cry; thankful the pounding water muffled the sound, she sagged against the wall.

Several minutes later, Laney reached for the soap and washed with brisk strokes. Her body burned with lingering pleasure and embarrassment. Fantasizing about the enemy had never been a problem for her before, and she had faced plenty of enemies in her 35 years. She sighed. With any luck at least, she would never have to face him.

* * * * *

General Alrik Torfa couldn't believe his good luck. When the aide brought news that the enemy, Sergeant Major Laney Bradford, was in the Alliance war party, he had rushed up to the observation ledge. These battles were pointless. The Earth soldiers could not prevail. They had managed to drag things out this long because his people had no interest in destroying this world.

The Sergeant Major was the reason for the Earthlings success. Their most talented strategist, she obviously had the soldiers' admiration. They never quit and never surrendered. The soldier in him admired such leadership. The Delroi were horrified the Earth soldiers risked their

In the Runes: Defending Serenity

women in war, women who represented the Delroi's future.

He had seized one of their most powerful weapons, a world destroyer, and drawn the battle to this almost empty desert. If it had to be used, his scientists assured him they could clean up the mess. Surely, the Earth contingent would surrender rather than test his determination.

However, everything changed when he stepped on the observation platform and got his first glimpse of Laney Bradford. She *would* surrender. First her armies, and then her body. His blood stirred at the thought, imagining her writhing in ecstasy beneath him.

When she first spotted him from across the valley, he felt her gaze like a punch in the gut. His people said he would know his heartmate by the avalanche of awareness and lust that hit at first glance. Who knew that old tale would be so accurate? Better yet, he felt her response to him and hardened his resolve. He would have her complete surrender.

The communications officer got her on the radio and her voice dribbled like honey across Alrik's skin, smooth and warm. Panic edged her voice, unusual for someone so cool under fire, and she escaped from the ledge in haste.

Deciding his brother needing apprising about this newest development, he passed the chore of planning the surrender talks to a junior general. Half-way down the winding steps, he felt her again and ducked into an armory carved into the mountain side. The vision in her mind was so vivid he felt grateful for the privacy.

He stood with his back against the wall, breathing hard, while his mind joined her in pleasuring herself. Cock hard and throbbing, he knew it would be hours yet before he could seek his own release. He vowed to find a creative way to make her pay for his discomfort. He smiled at the thought, imaging her on her knees, mouth wrapped around him. Or maybe he would spank her. She so clearly deserved it for putting him through this unfulfilled torture. But first, he would bury himself so deeply in her she wouldn't be able to say where she began and he ended; and then he would say the words needed to bind them together forever.