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The image features a romantic scene with the silhouettes of a man and a woman in profile, facing each other. They are set against a dark night sky filled with vibrant fireworks in shades of red, pink, and yellow. The overall mood is celebratory and intimate.

FIREWORKS

Loribelle Hunt

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Fireworks

Loribelle Hunt

Dedication

To my editor, Jessica, my family, Shelli, Crystal, Dayna, Emma, and everyone else who gives a little shove when I need it!

And to the real Jessalyn, a great friend always willing to read my latest efforts. Thanks for the use of your name. This one's for you!

Chapter One

The bells over the door jingled. Jessalyn Banks didn't look up, didn't acknowledge his presence. Even though she had called him over, she needed a minute to steal herself against his appeal. Her best friend and assistant Nancy came up behind her, her spicy perfume heralding her advance, and leaned over the desk, one hand braced on its edge. Her voice was light and teasing when she whispered in Jessalyn's ear.

"Oh, the sexy police chief showed up. You really get service in this town, huh?"

Jessalyn shot her an evil look and stood. Nancy knew it was a sore point. Plastering a fake smile on her face, she turned to face Shane Moore. For a split second, his expression was unguarded and hot eyes clashed with hers. They seemed to promise long wild nights if she would just give in. *No way, Jessalyn. Get a grip.* He was bossy and arrogant and she didn't like him much, but she couldn't help the way her heart stuttered or the flush that spread up her neck. He crossed his arms over his chest and his gaze was shuttered. "I hear you have a secret admirer."

She snorted. If you could call him that. Jerking her head for him to follow her, she led the way into the small back kitchen. It was filled with roses. Not your garden-variety red or yellow or white roses either. Someone had gone to a great deal of effort to paint these black. She'd checked—there wasn't a florist for ninety miles that sold black roses.

"They were here when you opened the gallery this morning?"

She nodded, anger at the invasion of her space closing her throat.

"Was there are a card?" he asked, a slight tremor in his voice.

"No," she said, her voice sounding gruff to her ears.

He met her gaze and his expression didn't change. She couldn't tell if he was pissed or worried. Knowing how territorial Shane was of "his town" and how seriously he took his job, probably both.

"Anything else going on?"

She shrugged. Was a vague feeling of being watched something going on? Or the rash of hang-ups on her voice mail? Until he asked, she hadn't thought anything of it. She didn't think it meant anything. There was always someone watching her in Banks Crossing and the phone calls... Well, someone obviously had the wrong number. No, she wouldn't give in to paranoia.

Unfortunately, Shane could read her like a book. It was one of his more irritating habits. His eyes narrowed and he took her elbow, leading her back into the hall. Leaning down so they were almost nose-to-nose, he searched her face.

"What else, Jessie?"

Trying to put some distance between them, she stepped away and landed with her back against the wall. She realized her mistake immediately as he pressed closer. For a moment, she was completely distracted. He wore a white polo style shirt with the city logo emblazoned on the pocket, the black of his bulletproof vest visible through the weave. It stretched across wide shoulders and a broad chest her fingers itched to explore. He smelled masculine, aftershave mingled with deodorant and sweat, and was way too close for comfort. Shifting closer, he pressed against her hips and her eyes widened at his erection cradled between her legs.

Her pulse jumped in response and she firmed her resolve. *No no no. Not him.* Why couldn't she respond to another man like this? She shoved at his chest, and he reluctantly stepped back. Breathing a sigh of relief, she glared up at him.

"What else?" he asked roughly.

"Just some hang-up phone calls. Probably the wrong number." She rolled her eyes. "Happens all the time."

He gave her a hard look. "Maybe. What about the caller ID?"

"Private number," she mumbled.

"I'll check into it. Y'all go ahead and clear out for the day. My crime scene guys will come over and see what they can find."

She nodded and turned to find Nancy.

"Jessie?"

She looked over her shoulder, ready to blast him for using the nickname but he wasn't even looking at her.

"What?"

"Get your locks changed tomorrow."

She bit back a sharp retort. *Ya think, Shane? Never would have occurred to me.*

"I will," she answered instead.

"And Jessie?"

Jesus, now what? Throwing her hands in the air, she turned around to face him again. He moved closer and caught her around the waist.

"Be careful. I'll see you tomorrow."

He pushed her out the door before she could ask why or where.

* * *

Jessalyn hated being late with a passion that bordered on obsession. It didn't fit her image as a member of the upstanding Banks family or mesh with the one she'd created for herself as a reliable member of the community. Dependable people were not late. Smoothing down the front of her peach-colored skirt, she slipped into the town hall's meeting room as quietly as she could manage on marble floor in three-inch pumps. The sound echoed through the large, sparsely populated room and she cringed. So much for an inconspicuous entrance.

Arguing around a long golden oak table, all but one of the room's occupants ignored her. Police Chief Shane Moore sprawled in his chair at one end of the table. With his long legs stretched into the aisle, he rested his elbows on the edge of the seat's arms, leaving his hands to settle

loosely across his broad chest. When she entered, he grinned at her from a GQ face and she fought down a yearning to run her fingers through his close-cropped black hair. He was the picture of idleness. And totally sexy. The only seat available in the room was at his right.

Did she mention she hated being late because of the image she tried to uphold? In a moment of stark honesty, she admitted Shane's presence might have a teeny bit to do with that too. Her entire life, he'd been a thorn in her side, constantly teasing her and calling her a stick in the mud. As a teenager, she'd had a wild crush on him, but who hadn't? She was so over that now, never mind the frisson of desire that unfurled any time he was near. *Ignore it, ignore it, ignore it.* Especially today. Today she was not up for one of their verbal sparring matches.

After the roses had shown up in her gallery a few days ago, he'd made it a point to check up on her. Every time she turned around, he was there. In all honesty, he always had been. It was a small town after all. But lately, she was more aware of him, less able to resist her attraction to him. It was driving her crazy. That was bad enough, but she was afraid if she spent any time with him she'd blurt out her recent spurt of bad luck. Today's? A flat tire.

He arched an eyebrow at her and opened his mouth to speak, but snapped it shut when she sent him the look her brother called the Death Glare. He grinned instead and drew his legs up in a long teasing slide when she reached for the back of the empty chair and tugged.

When she was seated, he leaned over and whispered in her ear, his voice a rough caress over her skin. "You're late."

Go ahead. Rub it in. She kept the grumble silent and concentrated on ignoring him.

The argument carried on at the other end of the table. She tried to figure out what was going on, but found Shane's close proximity too distracting. He always had that effect on her. Heat seemed to roll off him in waves, and she didn't mean the thermometer kind. He was pure sex appeal and completely off limits. The disagreement grew louder and she gave in to curiosity.

Leaning closer, she asked, "What's that about?"

The side of her breast brushed his arm. His eyes grew hooded, his gaze dropping to the swell highlighted by the thin linen blouse she wore. Her toes curled in response and she stifled a groan. When she got home, she'd have to dive into the pool to cool off.

"There's some disagreement about which fireworks company to go with."

She nodded. Nothing exciting. They had the same fight every year and had fallen into the habit of alternating between two Panhandle contractors. That would work itself out by the end of the meeting when everyone had blown off a little steam. The heat had everyone on edge.

"Did I miss anything else?"

"Voted on the food committee first off."

He gave her his patented devilish grin and she sat back, certain she wouldn't like the rest. She was always on the Fourth of July planning board's food committee. Usually she covered the task with a partner, but this year Jan begged off because of family issues. It wasn't a big deal. She could handle it alone and still had last year's list of vendors and volunteer cooks. It never changed from year to year. There wasn't room for Shane to cause her trouble there. Or was there? His confident pose certainly suggested otherwise.

"What?" she asked suspiciously.

"The vote was for me to help you out."

She took a deep calming breath. There was no way she could work with him. Between the teasing and the sexual innuendo he drove her nuts.

"I can handle it fine on my own."

"Oh, it's no problem. I have the time."

"That won't be necessary."

"No, really. I insist," he answered, a slight edge under his usual amused drawl.

She narrowed her eyes, but before she could engage in a verbal skirmish with him, someone cleared their throat from the opposite end of the table, an obvious call for attention. She'd been so focused on Shane that she'd missed the end to the other quarrel. Looking up, she found herself the focus of eight pairs of eyes, and a blush spread up her neck. She *hated* to be the center of interest.

"Is there any other business?" Charles, the chairman, asked.

When no one answered in the affirmative, he adjourned the meeting. The meeting broke into groups with the usual catch up chitchat. Shane hurried out while Adella cornered her, peppering her with questions about the welfare of her family. Since she was one of the town's resident gossip spreaders and busy bodies, Jessalyn knew it was wisest not to ignore her. If she ran off after Shane, the whole town would be linking them together before she made the parking lot. Sighing, she resigned herself to missing him. He offered her a cocky salute from the open doorway while Adella worked up her stride. The snake. She resisted the urge to stick her tongue out at him and plastered a friendly smile on her face.

It was twenty-five minutes before she could gracefully break away and go in search of him. Expecting to track him down in his office at the police station, she was surprised to see him leaning against her car in the parking lot talking to one of his officers. He watched her approach and nodded good-bye to the officer, who upon seeing her must have decided to get out of the way fast. She felt her blood pressure rising. *Smart man.*

"Hey, Miss Jessie," Shane drawled when she reached him. Her spine stiffened like steel.

"You call me that just to piss me off, don't you?" she bit out through clenched teeth. The man really irritated her.

"Oh, I don't know," he answered, slowly rising up to his full height. Broad and well muscled, at least a foot taller than her measly five feet four inches, the sight made her heart kick up a beat. She hated how her

body responded to his. A bead of moisture trickled down the side of his jaw and she resisted the urge to lick it off.

“Could be because Miss Jessalyn Banks belongs to all the good people of Banks Crossing.” He paused and added with a sly grin. “But Jessie is all mine.”

Ignoring the little thrill that shot through her at the possessive words, she concentrated on the outrage. His indeed! Arrogant man. Her temper seemed to amplify the heat of the day and she reminded herself of her task—dump him from the food committee and get on her way. The more distance she kept between herself and Shane Moore the better. She opened her mouth to speak, but he interrupted her.

“No. Don’t ask, Jessie,” he said firmly.

She blinked up at him. “How do you know what I was going to ask?”

“It’s written all over your face. You aren’t getting rid of me,” he said. “We have the same thing every Fourth. It’s time to shake things up a bit.”

With a suggestive smirk, he added. “I’m just the man for that job.”

Somehow she knew he wasn’t talking about food anymore. Nostrils flared in anger, she looked him up and down. *Not in this lifetime, bubba.*

“Could you move? You’re blocking my door.” She nodded at her car and gave the keys in her hand a little jingle.

“No problem,” he said, stepping a few inches to the side. He crowded her as she bent to unlock the car and opened the door, letting out some of the pent up hot air.

“I’d like a copy of your notes on the preparations, if you don’t mind, and maybe we could get together this weekend to go over it all.”

She bent to toss her bag onto the passenger seat and reached around the steering column to start the car and its air conditioner. Hot air blasted her face and she quickly stepped back, landing hard against Shane’s tall frame. His hands settled on her hips and pulled her closer.

“Why, Jessie,” he whispered in her ear. “I had no idea you were so aggressive.”

She gasped. The man was pure nerve, and he managed to affect *and* get on all hers. Pulling away, she spun around and glared up at him. A long tendril of hair pulled free from its twist and he gently pushed it behind her ear, rubbing a calloused finger along her jaw line when he did. A frisson of sexual awareness ran through her.

"The notes?" he asked.

Sighing, she reached for her briefcase, her anger fading some at the tender gesture. Anything to get rid of him, right? After handing over a sheaf of papers, she got in the car and reached for the door. He stopped her before she could shut it, leaning down and blocking its access.

"How 'bout we get together Friday night to go over this?"

Friday night. Was that a sneaky way of finally getting her to accept a date?

"I'm busy," she said with a slight smile trying to discourage him.

"Washing your hair?" he asked dryly. "Lunch tomorrow then." He held a hand up before she could answer. "Don't say no. The Fourth is less than two weeks off."

"Okay, fine." She was proud of herself for keeping the irritation out of her voice. "The Diner at noon."

Nodding, he stepped back. "Good."

She didn't listen to his response, just pulled the car door closed with a slam. Checking the rearview mirror, she backed into the street and swung the car towards home. She glanced up as she drove past to see his steady gaze following her, arms crossed over his chest. She sighed. Pure temptation. No man had a right to look so damned good.

* * *

This time Shane was the one running late and picking up the pace was a waste of effort. He should have driven from the police station to the The Diner. Every three feet someone stopped to say hello or comment on last year's football season or the new coach. He snorted. High school was

seventeen very long years ago and his college glory years were just as distant. Not that anyone in Bank's Crossing, Florida was likely to let him forget anytime soon.

He was not one of those people obsessed with the good old days. Except for the football, they hadn't been that good to begin with. After blowing out his knee his senior year at FSU, any dreams of going pro went too. He'd finished out the school year, come home and went to work at the small ten-man police department. Now at thirty-five, he was the youngest police chief in town history. Life was good.

Sometime after the promotion last year though, he started to think it would be better if there were someone to share it with and Jessie Banks hadn't been far from his thoughts since. What he wanted with such a prissy tense woman was beyond him. He remembered when they were in high school she'd been carefree, always laughing. He'd heard back then she had a crush on him, but since she was three years younger, he hadn't thought anything of it. Eventually her mother managed to mold her into the proper Southern Belle she was today. He grinned. He intended to do some un-molding. If he was any judge, the sparks of temper he needled out of her were only a small part of her buried passion. He fully intended to enjoy uncovering it.

The Diner anchored one corner of the town square, on the opposite side from his office. When he reached the end of the adjacent sidewalk, he got his first glimpse in the long plate glass window. It was too busy to see from out here if she was inside. He jogged across the intersection and pulled the heavy door open, scanning the booths as he entered.

She sat in the far back corner, drumming her fingernails and watching the clock over the kitchen window, a half empty glass of tea before her. As he watched, she picked it up and tipped it back, the long elegant line of her throat working to swallow the liquid. What would those lips look like wrapped around his cock? Setting the glass down, she glanced over, caught his gaze and arched an eyebrow. Damn. Caught staring again. He felt a drop of perspiration run down his back and knew it wasn't from running in the noon heat. Jessie Banks could make him sweat in a blizzard.

The lunch crowd was thick and he elbowed his way through, nodding and answering called out greetings as he did. He slid in the booth and grinned at her. She'd waited for him. This was progress, right?

Sally approached the table, pen and pad in hand. She nodded.

"Hey, Chief. What can I get ya?"

"Hey, Sally." He met Jessie's irritated gaze. "Did you order yet?"

"Just bring me a salad, Sally, with ranch dressing on the side."

"Sure thing, Jessalyn. Chief?"

"The cheeseburger plate and sweet tea, Sally," he answered with a wink.

He turned back to see Jessie glaring at him.

"What?"

"You're late."

"I've had a busy morning. Security stuff for next week."

Among other things, like getting filled in on her current run of bad luck. He hadn't been able to track down the purchaser of the roses and the phone calls came from a pre-paid cell phone registered in a fake name. That worried him, but it was the slashed tire yesterday, and her not reporting it, that made his blood boil. If he hadn't had to go into the garage this morning on another matter, he would never have known about it. It looked like she had a stalker and she wasn't taking it seriously. Ignoring his sudden silence, she went on.

"I have to go over to my other gallery this afternoon and I have a meeting at the historical society here in town tonight. I don't have time to waste today, Shane, and you're the one who insisted on this meeting."

"Who's wasting time, honey? You gotta eat. So do I. Then there's this food-planning thing to go over. You're killing two birds with one stone, right?"

Her eyes flashed at him and he knew it was because of the endearment. She'd ripped him a new one once for calling her honey. Now he did it at every opportunity, just to see her lose a little of her cool. He

didn't expect major fireworks at The Diner, but a man could hope couldn't he? Speaking of sparks...

"Were you going to tell me about the tire? And what else is going on by the way?"

She sighed. "I just found out it was done on purpose this morning. Yesterday, I got Bob to come out and change it and left. He called today."

Sally passed by the table and set down a glass. Taking a long drink, he looked Jessie over. She was a beautiful woman, a little on the short side but soft and curved in all the right places. Nothing marred the oval perfection of her face and her long chestnut hair was in a stylish twist. He thought of it as her armor, this flawlessly put together façade, and yearned for the day he got beneath it. Soon. He'd crack her protective shell soon. And protect her at the same time.

His eyes narrowed. Then he'd put his foot down. She worked too hard, running the gallery in town and a second one fifty miles down the coast in Panama City. Fatigue showed in the new lines around her eyes and the carefully applied make-up that he knew she didn't often wear this late in June. Well, he could relieve some of her burden by taking over the Fourth of July arrangements. Most of it would be the same as last year anyway. It was a simple matter of visiting the vendors and he had the list.

"You work too much," he said, making it sound like an accusation.

In a moment of openness, she laughed, the sound teasing his senses, gliding over his skin. If he didn't have her soon, he'd snap.

"Believe it or not, art galleries do not run themselves."

"I imagine not, but you don't have to do all the volunteer stuff on top of that. How many boards and committees are you on? Ten? Twenty?" he asked sarcastically.

And just like that the reserved, remote Jessalyn Banks snapped back in place. Damn.

"There's always been a Banks involved locally. You know that."

"Let your brother handle some of it."

“He does,” she fired back. “Why are we arguing about this? What I do isn’t any of your business.”

He looked at her a long moment. “It will be, Jessie. Mark it down on that little calendar you carry everywhere, because it will be.”

She gasped and leaned forward, no doubt to give him a piece of her mind, but Sally saved him from certain death by plopping two plates down on the table. She arched her eyebrows and looked back and forth between the two of them.

“At it again? Should I confiscate the knives?” she joked.

Jessie looked up with an smile. “Everything’s fine, Sally. I’ll let you know when it’s time to hide the body.”

Shaking her head and laughing, Sally dropped a check on the end of the table. “Sure thing, sugar. Wouldn’t want be you, Chief.”

He wasn’t sure he wanted to be him right now either. Ignoring the frosty glare from the opposite side of the table, he picked up his burger and took a bite. Closing his eyes, he savored it. Bud did it again. No one could throw a burger together quite like the short order cook slash owner. He didn’t linger over his lunch and noticed when he finished that Jessie hadn’t done much but push her salad around the plate.

“You’re not eating.”

She shrugged. “I’m not hungry. It’s too hot to eat. So what else was it you wanted to discuss? I’ve already verified about half the vendors. The rest won’t take long.”

He pulled a sheet of paper from his pocket.

“Just some small changes. We have the same stuff every year, a little variety would be nice.”

With a suspicious look, she took it and started reading. He saw the moment she came to the biggest change. Her expression froze and her fingers gripped the edge of the page. Her eyes narrowed on his face.

“No,” she said.

“No?” He was incredulous. Just like that? No discussion? He was on this little two-person committee too, damn it.

"We always have chicken salad. For people who don't want barbeque or hamburgers, you know? And you want to replace it with Drunk Chicken?" Her voice was laced with disbelief and her voice quivered. Probably from outrage. "This is for the city's booth too. And this is a family event, and you want to switch out something traditional for something that sounds like it should be arrested?"

Now that was taking prissy just a little too far. He rolled his eyes.

"We're mired in tradition. Live a little, Jessie. And the alcohol cooks out of it. It's just flavor."

"No," she said firmly.

"Yes."

She sighed. "Shane. We don't have time to change things as it is. Who were you planning on cooking this? What would it cost? The other changes, sure, but not this."

"You haven't even tried it. And we'll do it with the department's barbeque. Most people don't eat chicken at this thing anyway so it won't cost anymore than the girly stuff."

"Girly stuff? Gir—I can't believe you." Huffing, she pushed her plate away and reached for her bag.

"You'll like it, Jessie. I promise. Matter of fact, I have a great idea. I'll come over Friday after work and we can grill some up at your house. If you hate it, I won't bring it up again."

He held his breath, hoping she'd rise to the bait. She held his gaze a long moment before nodding and he started to relax.

"And that's it, Shane. I'll try your chicken." She stood up. "But this is *not* a date."

"Of course not."

"Jessie." He caught her hand before she could stalk off. "Be careful. And call me, dammit, if anything else happens."

She pressed her lips together and nodded reluctantly before turning away. How he managed to keep a straight face until her back was turned. He had her right where he wanted her.

Chapter Two

On Friday, Jessalyn left work early and started the aggravating drive home. She loved living on the Gulf, but the summer traffic sucked. Her cell phone rang as she finally turned on her street and she answered it irritated, expecting Shane on the other end and not even glancing at the caller ID. What had possessed her to agree to dinner with him?

“Now what?”

“Wow, guess I won’t bother you at home anymore.”

She pulled in her driveway, closed her eyes and leaned her head against the steering wheel as the laughing feminine voice registered. Nancy. Gallery manager and best friend extraordinaire. They’d been playing phone tag all week.

“Sorry,” she answered, putting the car in park and jumping out. “I was expecting someone else.”

“Someone tall, dark, and handsome that owns his own handcuffs?” she asked, the laughter still heavy in her voice.

Reaching the door, Jessalyn juggled her purse and briefcase and turned the key in the lock. Inside, she kicked it closed, dropping her things on the entry table, and did something she rarely did. Curse. Loudly.

“Fuck! No way. Not now.”

It was hot in the house. Too hot. She walked to one of the ceiling vents and held her hand under it. Hot air.

“What?” Nancy asked alarm in her tone.

“My a/c is dead and it’s not even July yet and Shane’s due any minute,” she said, giving into the urge to whine. After all if you couldn’t

gripe to your best friend, who could you complain to? She walked down the hall to the thermostat and turned it off before hurrying to her bedroom upstairs.

“Aw, hon. The thing with Shane will work itself out. Do you some good, too,” she snickered. “And believe it or not, there *are* A/C repairmen in Florida. Besides with the air out, he’ll be all hot and sweaty and well, hot. If you know what I mean.”

She groaned. Did she ever. In her room, she pulled the phone book from a desk drawer and sat on the edge of the bed. She flipped to the heating and cooling section and stared dismayed at the short list.

“I better let you go and see if I can catch any of these places before they leave for the weekend. I’ll see you Monday.”

“Sure thing. I expect a full report on the hot date.”

Jessalyn snorted. “Yeah right. Move along. Nothing to see here.”

Nancy laughed in response. “Whatever you say, sweetie. Later.”

She waited for the click and started dialing. Ten frustrating minutes later, she tossed the phone on the bed. No one was available for at least a month and it was hot, damn it. Record-breaking hot according to the guy on the local news. The heat made her irritable and restless and maybe a little bit reckless. She had an urge to go skinny-dipping. Her pool was enclosed by a privacy fence and it would be a fine idea if Shane wasn’t due any minute. But she kept looking with longing out the upstairs window to the ocean visible down the block. Smiling she closed her eyes in memory. Years ago she would have waited for dusk and gone for it. Back then swimming naked in the ocean under the moonlight seemed perfectly natural. Then adulthood intruded.

With a sigh, she turned away from the view. Earlier in the day, Shane left a message on her voice mail saying he’d arrive around five p.m., which didn’t leave her much time to get ready. She went back and forth between wanting to see him and wanting to avoid him. The crazy swinging made her feel like a ping-pong ball.

Instead of a swim she longed for, she flung all the veranda doors open to catch the cross draft and stood in her walk-in closet debating

what to wear. She heard a car door slam and moments later the back gate creaked open.

He knocked on the door downstairs and called out.

“Jessie?”

Going out on to the veranda, she leaned over the railing and peered down. He stood below her with several bags grocery bags dropped at his feet. Grinning, he craned his neck back to look at her.

“You have all the doors open up there and this one locked? What gives, honey? You didn’t expect me to go away, did you?”

She rolled her eyes. She should be so lucky. Or unlucky. Hell, she didn’t know anymore.

“I’ll be right down.”

Back in the bedroom, she caught a look at herself in the dresser mirror and repressed a groan. She was flushed from the heat, her uncontrollable hair had escaped from its twist and her linen suit was wrinkled. At least it was a skirt. Kicking off her pumps, she quickly shimmied out of her hose, dropping them on the bed. She removed her blouse and tugged on a plain tank top as she jogged down the stairs.

Downstairs, Shane tapped his foot impatiently at the door. She flung it wide and went to open the other sets of French doors on the bottom floor. Her grandfather built the house in 1950. To make the best of the Gulf breeze in the hottest summer months, the two-story house was circled by deep porches and double doors on each level. With the air conditioner out, she’d have to open it up, turn the ceiling fans to high and hope for the best.

When she made it back to the kitchen, she watched bemused as Shane made himself at home. He cranked the radio to the local country station, and the smooth mellow voice of George Strait flowed from the speakers saying *she’d leave you with a smile*. After emptying the bags on the long counter bar, he got a glass casserole dish from a cabinet and she rummaged a coke from the refrigerator. She took her time, letting the frigid air wash over her flushed skin. Standing, she rolled the frosty can

over her forehead and sighed at the relief the cold brought her heated body.

She felt his gaze on her back and turned in slow motion. Or maybe it was the kiss that was slow motion. She moved. He was there. Why not kiss him? It was instinctive. Sweet. Languorous like the summer heat, a slow glide of his tongue against hers. He wrapped an arm around her waist and with a firm tug, she was pressed knee to shoulder against him. He ground his erection into her belly and she jumped back in surprise. Was she ready for this?

Eyes wide, she hated the stammer in her voice. “Um, what are we doing here, Shane?”

What were they doing? Well, he was going out of his mind. Shane wasn’t so sure about her. Breathing hard, he tried to reign in his libido. There was a time and a place for everything. A time to feel her writhing underneath him. Oh yeah. But it wasn’t now. Right this moment. *Get a grip, man.* Back in control, he looked down at her and grinned.

“Just saying hey, Jessie.”

She stared at him like he’d lost his mind. He knew he had—lost it over her.

“Say it from over there.”

He just smiled at her. After that taste, she was the crazy one if she thought he would go away. Even half-dressed in her prissy work clothes, the woman was hot, impossible to resist. The top was a nice touch. He could get used to seeing her expose that much skin.

Turning away from temptation, he cut a whole chicken from its plastic cover and set it in the dish. She edged closer and watched over his shoulder. *Gotcha!* He’d always been drawn to her curiosity. And hell, women everywhere loved a man who could cook. He figured that earned him a few bonus points. Next he brought out a bottle of olive oil and powdered seasonings. He poured a liberal amount of the oil over the bird, then a handful of the seasoning, and rubbed it all in.

Moving to the sink, he elbowed the faucet on and cleaned up. After drying his hands on a nearby towel, he reached for the six-pack of beer he brought along. He pulled one off and put the rest in the fridge. Reminded of the heat by the blast of cold air, he arched an eyebrow at her.

“Trying to save money?”

“Don’t start.” She glared. “The air died and no one is free to fix it for months.”

“I’ll get my brother to stop by tomorrow.”

“I called him first,” she said peevishly. “Linda said he’s booked.”

Jessalyn and Linda, his brother’s secretary and bookkeeper, had a long-standing well-known rivalry. Linda wouldn’t be in any big rush to pencil Jessie into the schedule. But if he called his brother, it would be taken care of. Had to be since he was planning on spending a great deal of time at the house over the summer.

A warm breeze blew through the door and she moved outside, lifting her face to catch it. She looked at the pool, open longing in her gaze, and he was overcome by inspiration. Or devilry. Who could really say? Moving up behind her, he settled his hands on her hips. She jumped, but didn’t move away and he leaned down to nuzzle her neck. Cocking her head to the side, she gave him better access and sighed. For a minute, he was lost in her feel, in the salty tang of sweat on her skin.

Wrapping one arm around her waist and scooping the other under her knees, he lifted her slighter form, took two long steps forward and dropped her in the deep end. She came up sputtering. The shirt and skirt were greatly improved plastered to her curves. He smirked. Nice work there.

“What the hell did you do that for?” she yelled, while she tugged the top and skirt off, leaving her tanned skin covered only by bra and panties. This was getting better by the minute.

She threw her clothes out of the pool and they landed like a gauntlet at his feet. Legs planted wide, he set his hands on his hips and smiled down her.

“You needed to cool off. Admit it. Now that you’re over the shock, you’re glad I made you get in.”

Outrage sparked in her eyes, but she treaded water making no move to get out. “Made me get in? You ass! You threw me in!”

“Hmm...” He pretended to consider her words. “I guess I did at that.”

The water didn’t just cool the blush on her skin; it had the same effect on her temper. She relaxed and with a slight smile floated on her back and closed her eyes. Unable to resist the bait any longer, Shane stripped and dove in. He came up next to her and shook the water from his head. She smiled, but didn’t move and he grabbed her hands, pulling her slowly to him.

“You can’t be good for me,” she whispered.

“I’m perfect for you,” he answered before catching her lips with his.

Jessalyn’s eyes slid shut on a sigh as his teeth nibbled her lower lip and fire lit her veins. She’d fantasized about him so often. Why not go for it just this once? Pressing against him, she lifted her legs to circle his waist and her eyes flew open. He’d undressed *all* the way down. Feeling an unaccustomed sense of freedom, she reached between them and circled his cock with her fingers. Her grip light, she tested his girth and length, the circle of her finger and thumb sliding over smooth skin from base to tip and back again. She was thrilled as his breath hitched. She could make him lose that drawling control that so infuriated her. Before she could test the theory, his hand fell over hers and he gently removed it, pinning it behind her back.

She moaned her protest, rubbing herself over his hard length like a cat in heat. A part of her sat back in shock at the display that was so unlike her. The rest was so caught up in the moment she didn’t care how out of character she was acting. This was Shane, the object of her teenaged and very adult late night fantasies. She hadn’t become such a successful businesswoman by not taking advantage of once in a lifetime opportunities. The proper Jessalyn would just have to take a hike.

All concerns about that fled and pleasure rippled through her when he dipped his head and caught her nipple through the wet cotton of her bra. With one hand snug around her middle, he lowered her legs and somehow tugged her wet panties off. She repressed a very un-Jessalyn-like giggle as they sailed through the air to land under the shaded patio table.

His hands settled under her hips, dragging them to the surface as he stepped backwards into shallower water. When his shoulders were above water, he stopped and his mouth covered her. His tongue flicked at her clitoris and heat flooded through her. He worked a calloused finger into her pussy, pushing it in and out a couple of thrusts before adding another. The combination of the weightlessness of the water and the intensity of his stroking fingers and teasing tongue resulted in a complete loss of equilibrium. She scrambled to regain some sense of command, whimpering as her mind screamed *pull away* while her body yearned to get closer. He must have sensed her conflict. Lifting his head, he met her gaze.

“Shh, Jessie. I’ve got you. Just let go.”

She choked on a laugh. The sexiest man in town had his head between her legs in her pool and she was supposed to “just let go”? He kept an intense gaze on her as he turned his hand so his fingers curved up and brushed the sensitive front side of her pussy. With the thumb of the same hand, he pressed her clit, rubbing it in small tight circles. She gasped and bucked against him, back arching and getting a mouthful of water. His other hand was immediately under her head, pulling her back up, but he never stopped the gentle torment.

“It’s having no control, right?”

She shuddered at the tenderness in his tone, and the edge that underscored it. The roughness she sensed in him was close to the surface. She heard it in his voice, saw it in the tense angles of his face. It turned her on more.

“Yes,” she whispered.

Lifting her body so he held her flush against him, he nibbled her neck and whispered back to her.

“You’ll get used to it.” He pinched her clit hard, just like she liked it. “Now come for me, honey.”

She wanted to tell him she didn’t perform on demand, but at the moment speech was beyond her. The most intense orgasm she’d ever had rushed through her, rhythmically tightening and loosening her muscles. Just when she thought it was over, when the contractions began to ebb, he lifted her legs back around his hips and thrust deep inside her. She threw back her head, her eyes registering fluffy clouds passing overhead, as he built a rhythm that had water slapping the sides of the pool. Her second orgasm went on forever and ended too soon. He came when the ripples pulsing through her subsided, holding her in a fierce grip and whispering in her ear. “Jessie, Jessie, Jessie”.

He let her go so that her torso floated on top of the water as she stared at a bunny shaped cloud, content and relaxed. Her mind wandered and her eyelids dropped. That was the best two orgasms she’d had in, well, much too long to bear considering. And Shane lived up to expectations. Of course he would with that body just made for sin. Good as she felt, this had to be a huge mistake. He’d try to take over her life if she gave him half a chance. Her eyes flew open, meeting his gaze and she attempted to move away. A slow grin lit his face and he cupped her face in his hands.

“You’re mine now, Jessalyn Banks,” he said softly.

His? Not on her life. She shook her head and laughed softly.

“That was just sex, Shane. Really good sex, but hardly the beginning of a lasting relationship.”

Eyes narrowed, he growled and smacked her on the ass. She yelped. Wiggling free, she swam to the edge of the pool and pulled herself up to sit on the edge, glaring at him.

“What was that for?”

With slow, deliberate strokes, he swam to where she perched and slid between her legs. His hands circled her ankles and she was sure he was

going to tug her back into the water. With a gentle touch, he ran them up her calves, to her knees, spreading them wide. Desire stirred through her again and her breath caught waiting for his next move. He dipped his head, lightly biting the inside of her thigh, and craving zinged to her core. Standing, he rested his hands on the stone patio beside her thighs. She was caged in. He leaned in, his breath feathering the side of her neck and spoke quietly in her ear.

“That’s okay, honey. I’m not going anywhere. I can wait.”

Her breath caught, whether at his audacity or the lips trailing towards her collarbone, she couldn’t say. She should really push him away, get her distance back, but found herself leaning into his embrace. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, his rich masculine scent filling her nostrils. In a minute. She’d put a stop to this in just a minute.

Chapter Three

Late again. This was becoming a bad habit she placed firmly on Shane's shoulders. If she weren't so busy taking on extra projects and working extras hours to avoid him, she wouldn't have been so tired she'd overslept, right? So of course it was all his fault.

Hard as she tried, she couldn't erase the memory of what had happened in her pool three days ago. Thank God she was on the pill and they'd had a very curt "I'm clean, your clean" conversation before she'd kicked him out Friday night. But she still couldn't banish the memory of his strong arms holding her up or his penis moving inside her. As if she didn't feel awful enough about the whole thing, his brother showed up the next day and got her air conditioner working again. Worse, some wires had been cut. The dead a/c unit was intentional.

She fumed, driving too fast down the last side street to her gallery. The sight that greeted her when she rounded the corner into the parking lot made her heart race and her body flash in sudden heat. Flashing lights everywhere she turned. She barely had the car in park before she jumped out and ran towards the door. Where was Nancy? A solid hand grabbed her arm before she could duck in the door. A tall no-nonsense officer held her outside.

"You can't go in there, ma'am."

Fear changed to anger in a heartbeat.

"This is my gallery. My assistant—my friend—should have been here before me this morning."

His eyes softened in pity and her stomach, already on edge from the nerves of the last few days, knotted until she thought she would lose her

breakfast. Before she could question him, she heard voices coming down the hall from the open doorway. Two paramedics appeared, rolling a stretcher and speaking quietly to the person bundled on it. Jessalyn convulsively swallowed the bile that rose in her throat. The familiar blond hair was streaked red.

The officer tugged her out of the way so they could pass. If not for the familiar platinum locks, Jessalyn would not have recognized her old friend and employee. They had an oxygen mask concealing most of her face, but what she could see was a battered, bloodied mess. They lifted her into the waiting ambulance, and Jessalyn trailed behind trembling in shock. What the hell had happened? Her brain synapses fired at the thought and she whirled to face the grim-faced officer.

“What happened?” she demanded.

“We’re hoping you can fill some of that in.” He flipped open his notebook and she resisted the urge to crane her neck over its edge. “Someone called 911 at nine—we think it was Ms. Burke—but didn’t speak so a patrol was dispatched to check it out. He found—”

“You weren’t that patrol?” she interrupted.

He met her gaze and held his hand out. “No, ma’am. I’m Sergeant. Grey. The shift supervisor.”

After she briefly gripped his palm and released it, he continued. All business Sergeant. Grey.

“When the officer arrived, the back door was open and after calling out and getting no response, he entered the building. He found Ms. Burke on the floor in the office and called it in.”

He paused, giving it a minute to sink in. Her mind raced. It was Monday and she was late, so instead of their usual Monday morning stop at IHOP, Nancy had come in alone. Jessalyn closed her eyes. Her fault. If she hadn’t been so distracted...

“She lost consciousness shortly before the ambulance arrived. She didn’t speak except to give us a name. Derek McCoy.”

She took a deep breath, the air sharp in her constricted chest. Suddenly it all made sense. Sergeant Grey watched her intently.

“That names means something to you,” he stated.

“Her ex-husband.” She exhaled, rage beginning to build and roll through her. Something flashed in the officer’s eyes and he stepped away from her, reaching for the mike attached to his shoulder.

She didn’t notice, too busy trying to control the hot simmer in her blood, the never before experienced urge to really *hurt* someone. Nancy’s battered face flashed through her mind. That son of a bitch. Maybe she would kill him.

Grey returned and looked her over. “Why don’t we go inside to talk. I noticed you have a little kitchen in the building.”

Turning she led the way, careful not to look in her office where a couple of men walked around with cameras and gloved hands. Pausing in the kitchen doorway, she took in the pristine room, decorated in Nancy’s fifties kitsch. The red chrome edged table and vinyl chairs were untouched as was the retro looking coffee maker. Her heart cracked. Nancy hadn’t made it this far. Blinking back tears, she moved to the counter, busying herself with the machine and trying to get a grip on her rampaging emotions. When it was percolating, she turned back to Sergeant Grey.

“I should get to the hospital,” she said.

“I just need to ask you a few questions first.”

Her nod was jerky and she moved to the dishwasher to pull out a couple of clean mugs.

“Go ahead,” she finally answered.

“You said McCoy is her ex-husband. How long have they been divorced?”

“About eight months. They were married seven years.”

He accepted the coffee she passed to him and asked for the sugar pourer on the counter.

“There’s not a history of abuse calls in his or her name.” He paused, taking a long swallow of the hot liquid. “Did you ever see evidence of violence?”

The question made her uncomfortable. Maybe it was the analytical way he delivered it, or the suspicion she'd never pushed with Nancy. She'd asked carefully, gently. If she'd been more insistent with her friend would they be here now? Guilt joined anger.

"I know things were bad, mentally, in their relationship. I don't know if he ever hit her." She added bitterly, "That's obviously changed. Has he been arrested yet?"

"We're looking for him," Sergeant Grey said softly. "Does she have any family we should notify? Someone who can watch out for her?"

The phone clipped to her waist rang and she glanced at the display before hitting the off button. Shane Moore could wait.

"Her daddy lives out on Lake Seminole. Dillon Burke. He's her only family and he doesn't have a phone. You'll have to send someone out there."

She met the policeman's gaze and felt a little less apprehension when she saw the resolve and steadiness reflected his. This guy would do what he could to find Nancy's attacker. And she would do whatever she had to help her friend. They spoke a few more minutes. She filled him in on the black roses and mentioned her own problems before she left and made the drive to Bay Medical Center.

She was surprised to see how much time had been spent at the gallery. Nancy had already been seen to and admitted into a private room. She was asleep when Jessalyn arrived and sank into the room's only chair by the windows. The nurses left her alone, maybe because Nancy had no one to sit with her, but she suspected because Sergeant Grey had greased the way. She didn't care. Nancy would need a friendly face when she woke up and she wasn't leaving.

She sat and stared out the window, alternately consumed by guilt and rage and terror for her friend. After the shift change, the new young nurse brought her a magazine that she idly flipped through before tossing aside and leaning her head back. Her eyes slid closed and she fought back a fresh wave of tears. She couldn't remember the last time she'd cried so much.

Sensing a presence in the room, she jerked and her eyes sprang open. She must have drifted off. The room was now dim, a light on above the bed and the setting sun throwing an eerie red cast over the window. Her breath caught in her throat at the sight by the bed. Shane had pulled a stool up its edge, sat with Nancy's small hand cradled between his big palms, murmuring something she couldn't hear. She was amazed and quickly pushed away the sudden surge of jealousy. He was offering her friend comfort and didn't deserve it. She must have made some sound of protest anyway because he looked up her, pinning her under his gaze. Angry. He was very angry at her. What the hell had she done? The thought fled when Nancy turned her head and held out her hand.

She hurried over and took it, fighting a fresh onslaught of tears at the close up look at her friend. One eye was swollen shut and stitches ran down one cheek. Her whole face was bruised and her left wrist was broken and in a cast. The nurse had told her when she arrived that there were also several broken ribs and cuts and bruises on her legs. They said she was lucky to have escaped any internal damage.

"Hey, you," she whispered, trying to keep the horror out of her voice.

Nancy tried to grin, grimaced at the movement.

"I look a fright, huh?" she joked.

Jessalyn smiled weakly, her heart breaking for her friend.

"Nothing a little cover up won't fix," she joked in return.

They shared a long look, each understanding what the other wished to say without having to say the words. Nancy broke the eye contact first, nodding her head at Shane.

"Moore here was just telling me about your hot date Friday night."

She felt a flush rush up her face. God, she hoped not. Some things were better left unremembered.

"Was he?" she tried to answer lightly.

"Hmm. Says he cooked you dinner," Nancy continued in a weary voice. "I told him grilling doesn't count."

Jessalyn laughed and met Shane's gaze across the bed.

“Well, there ya go. Not a date.”

He arched an eyebrow, remaining silent and turning alertly when the door pushed open. Nancy’s father came in, the big gruff man unusually quiet. He exchanged a long look with Shane and nodded at the younger man. It was her turn to arch an eyebrow. What was that all about?

Shane stood and looked at her.

“Time for us to go. Dillon is staying tonight and taking Nancy home with him when they release her in the morning. You can go see her in a couple of days.”

Her eyes narrowed. That sounded suspiciously like an order. She’d been her own boss for too many years to let any man order her around, despite the niggling little voice that said he was right. She shouldn’t visit for a couple of days probably. Shane’s jaw was clenched hard, his fists on his hips, looking like he expected a fight. Let him wait. She leaned over and kissed Nancy’s cheek.

“I’ll see you soon,” she said.

Grabbing her bag, she left the room and hurried to the elevator, not at all surprised when Shane fell into step beside her. Inside she pushed the button for the ground level and ignored him. He radiated heat and anger and sex and she wasn’t up for any of it. Downstairs in the lobby, she rummaged through her bag for her car keys before stepping outside, hyperaware of his gaze following her every move. When she finally found the keys buried in a side pocket, he reached over and plucked them out of her hand.

“Hey,” she snapped, holding her hand out.

He glared down at her and spoke in a clipped cold voice she’d never been the recipient of before.

“Do not push me right now, Jessie. Just go to the damned car.”

The voice more than the look spurred her to move and before she knew it, she was climbing in the passenger seat of her car. It was long, silent, uncomfortable drive. She should be glad of the distance shoved between them. That’s what she’d wanted right? But between Nancy’s situation and what felt like a rejection from Shane, she was sad and

upset. What the hell had she'd done to him? She thought it over, watching him from the corner of her eye. The more she thought the more pissed she got. She hadn't done anything. But he was treating her like a suspect, or worse, a child.

Shane pulled into her driveway and one by one unrolled his white knuckled fingers from the steering wheel. Turning the car off, he reached for the door handle while staring through the windshield.

"Inside," he ground out.

When she didn't immediately move, Shane released the catch on her seatbelt and reached across her for the door handle. His forearm brushed across her breasts and he forced his natural response down. They were going to get a few things straight tonight. No more of this bullshit one night thing and no more hiding. And no more scaring the life out of him.

He didn't want to ever relive that moment when Bill Thompson stuck his head around Shane's office door earlier and reluctantly passed on the news dispatch reported from Panama City. Sheer terror had gripped his heart when he heard a woman was attacked and severely beaten at the Beach Gallery. Twenty minutes and several phone calls later, his heart started pounding again when he found out Jessie was safe. And the entire day shift on the Panama City PD knew their witness was involved with the Bank's Crossing police chief. Hell, he didn't care about that. He wanted everyone to know. Starting with her.

To make matters worse, the woman turned off her damned phone. She might be okay physically, but emotionally she had to be in turmoil and she'd cut him off. His first instinct was to track her down and shake some sense into her. When the day shift sergeant asked him how to find Nancy's father, he'd volunteered to go get him, hoping it would give him time to calm down. It might have except he kept trying to call Jessie and she kept her fucking phone off. When he finally arrived at the hospital, he was good and pissed, his anger softening marginally at the sight of her curled up in the room's only vinyl covered chair.

Then he'd heard Dillon's choked cry. He got his first good look at Nancy and the panic seized his heart again. That could have been his Jessie. He'd heard on the long drive into town about how she'd helped Nancy leave her ex, helped her find a lawyer and stood with her through the long process. Heard about the threats the man had made, infuriated that his wife had the gall to leave him and the courts the nerve to settle a significant amount of his fortune to her. Jessie's stalker suddenly had a name and a face.

Derek McCoy hadn't been apprehended yet. He'd dropped off of the map, but Shane had a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach that it wasn't over. McCoy had said leaving the courthouse all those months ago that he'd kill both Nancy and Jessie. Shane hands fisted. Over his dead body.

She cleared her throat, tapping her foot in front of the door and looking at the keys in his hand. He reached around her, unlocked it and crowded her walking in. Whirling, she backed up, trying to put distance between them. As if he'd let her. He grabbed her shoulders, running his hands down her arms before spinning her around in a circle, overcome by the need to make sure she really was untouched.

"You're okay," he said, relief making his voice low and gruff.

He crushed her to him, knowing he held her too hard but for the moment not caring. After a minute, her arms came up around his back, her fists twisted in his shirt. His eyes squeezed shut while he fought a swell of emotion. Hands gripping her shoulders, he pushed her back enough to look down at her and shake her once.

"You scared me half to death. Don't ever do that again."

She burst into tears, loud wracking sobs that tore at his heart. Shit. Picking her up, he carried her to a couch in the den and sat with her on his lap letting her cry it out. He rubbed her back and waited for the storm to pass. He expected her to try to pull away when it did, to put the public persona back in her place. As the sobs subsided, she stiffened little by little until finally her back was ramrod straight. He fought back a laugh. So predictable and she wasn't getting away with it this time. She'd avoided him enough the last couple days and this was the final straw.

“Let me up,” she said, her voice low and subdued.

He did, reluctant to give up the feeling of her pressed close to his chest or to leave her with the illusion, however brief, that he was letting her go. She moved across the room and lifted her chin.

“I’m sorry.” She waved a hand through the air. “I don’t ever do that. I don’t know what came over me.”

He shrugged, hoping to ease her back into relaxing with him. “You’ve had a hard day.”

“Not nearly as bad as Nancy.”

A lone tear tracked down her cheek. He was across the room in a second, and pulling her close, he rocked a little back and forth. *Ah, baby, can’t you just let me in a little?* He wasn’t sure when the comforting embrace turned sexual, but suddenly her hands were up his shirt, her mouth moving up his neck, and he had a raging hard-on. As much as he wanted her, he wasn’t going to let her turn this into another excuse to push him out of her life. He stepped back and ran a hand through his hair. *Deep breaths, Shane.*

She edged closer, holding one hand out to him and licking her lips. Those full pouty lips drove him wild.

“Shane. I need...”

She trailed off, meeting his gaze. He wasn’t sure what he saw there, but he didn’t have it in him to deny her. For now he’d delude himself into thinking she realized how much she needed *him* and not just any warm body. He growled, taking her hand and yanking her to him. His mouth covered hers, starving, taking, drunk on her taste and feel. Tongue pushing past her lips, he groaned. She was sweet and silky and most important, his. It made him weak-kneed. In any other circumstances, he might have laughed. Big bad Shane Moore brought down by the straight-laced Jessalyn Banks. Who was definitely not being prim, her hands tugging his shirt up his body. More than willing to accommodate, he stopped the kiss and ripped it over his head, which may have been a mistake. Her tongue flicked his nipple and then her teeth closed over it. The contact threatened to blow his little head off.

Heart hammering, he drew back. Not like this. He wanted to enjoy her, wanted to take his time and drive her wild with desire. And if he drove away a few of her demons at the same time, well, more power to him. But first things first.

“I need a bed this time, Jessie.”

Taking a deep breath that shoved her breasts up and made his dick bob in appreciation, she nodded and walked into the hall.

“Upstairs. Last door on the left,” she murmured.

He caught her at the bottom of the stairs, tossed her over his shoulder in a classic fireman’s carry and took the steps two at a time. After setting her down across the threshold and toeing the door shut behind them, he took a good look around. He’d expected frilly and was glad to be proved wrong. Her furniture was old, a deep walnut color with rolled tops and rounded carved corners. An intricate rug covered the pine floors and an unmade modern four-poster took up center stage. He walked to the bed and sat to take off his boots, glad he’d thought to leave his gun belt in the car before he entered the hospital. When the boots were pushed to the side, he sat back and looked her over.

She stood in front of the dresser, her expression wary and hungry at the same time, playing with a button on her fancy blouse. He felt a slow smile spring from his heart.

“Take off your clothes, Jessie. Nice and slow. I want to see you.”

Her teeth pulled at her bottom lip and for a minute he thought she would refuse, but her fingers finally started freeing buttons until the shirt hung open, exposed a lacy bra and the tops of her creamy breasts. She let it fall from her shoulders and reached behind her, the sound of a zipper filling the air. The skirt slid down her thighs in a slow sexy tease and when she glanced up he caught a glimpse of humor in her eyes. The minx was enjoying this a little too much. So was he. She straightened, reaching for the clasp on the front of her bra and he stopped breathing.

“Stop,” he croaked out. “C’mere.”

Panic flashed across her face. He watched as she pushed it away and sauntered over. She stopped at arm’s length and kicked off her shoes.

“I’m not undressed,” she said, her voice light and raspy.

“Yeah.” He swallowed past a dry throat. “Just let me enjoy the view for a minute.”

She stood before him, shifting from foot to foot, in the white lace bra, a scrap of fabric for panties, garters and stockings. It was sexy as hell—he had no idea women still wore them for anything other than dress-up sex. He reached for her hand, lacing their fingers together, and tugged her closer. He leaned forward and kissed her stomach, breathing deep. She smelled like magnolias and sex, a combination that was fast becoming his favorite.

Jessalyn fought the urge to fidget. What was he doing? She needed him inside her *now*, and he was staring at her like she was a statue. He’d unlocked the buried part of her that wanted to be bad and he was being...so not bad. His eyebrows flew up in surprise and she realized she’d actually said that thought out loud.

“Really?” he drawled, pulling her down onto the bed and trapping her beneath him. His lips nibbled a line from the hollow of her neck to her ear and her stomach danced with anticipation. *Finally*. “So what did you have in mind, bad girl?”

Great. He was going to turn it into a joke. She stiffened, her urgency fading with his words. When she tried to roll away, he lifted his head and grabbed her hands, pinning them over her head.

“What’s wrong?”

She turned her head to the side, fighting a fresh wave of tears and wondering when this irritating man’s opinion started to matter so much. And why a woman who hadn’t cried in years was suddenly a free flowing fountain. *Shit*.

“Hey, talk to me, honey,” he said, mouth and teeth again trekking up the column of her neck.

Her traitorous body responded, heat pooling between her legs and nipples hardening. Her hips arched against his and she felt the erection still hidden under his clothes. She tried to pull her hands free, wanting

to reach inside his pants and rub it, to hurry him along, but he made a warning sound low in his throat.

“I can tie you to the bed if I have to.”

“Yes,” she hissed, whether in response to the threat or the teeth that closed over her nipple, she wasn’t sure.

The idea thrilled her, a hidden fantasy with a man she trusted enough to do it. He didn’t wait for verification, jumping up from the bed and going to her dresser. After rifling around her top drawer a moment he pulled out two scarves and turned to look at her with such an excited expression she almost laughed. *Like a boy in a candy shop*. She reached for the snap on her bra and dropped it to the floor as he approached.

“Lay down in the center of the bed,” he said gruffly.

She positioned herself, arms spread high and wide, and had a moment of misgiving when he picked up one wrist. He circled it with the scarf several times before tying a small knot and pulling the length taut to wrap around the post of the bed. When he moved to the other wrist, the panic crested. He watched her face, holding her gaze, and must have seen it. When her other wrist was secured, he stretched out next to her and dropped a gentle kiss on her lips.

“Give yourself to me, Jessie. I won’t hurt you and I promise you won’t regret it.”

Watching the emotions play over his face, lust and a fleeting vulnerability and something she didn’t care to examine too closely, she knew she was in over her head. But she thought she might like it. She’d wanted wild and out of control. She certainly got the out of control. And just like that, she relaxed. She’d been trying to figure out what she needed and he was going to deliver. She just had to go with it.

Nodding, she licked her lips and answered. “Okay.”

He exhaled a gust of air and started a sensual assault on her body that had her writhing and begging for more. His tongue teased her nipples into hard points and when his teeth bit down, a jolt of electricity shot to her pussy. The slightest pressure on her clit and she’d come. She ground her hips against him but instead of answering the call, his mouth

made a slow descent down her torso, licking and kissing and biting every inch. It was the best, but most frustrating, kind of torture.

When he reached her pelvis, he stood and ripped off the rest of his clothes before turning to her garters and slowly releasing the clips. He rolled each stocking down and pulled them off, then her panties started the same slow slide. When she was completely bare, he settled his shoulders between her thighs and blew a hot breath over her folds. Her body convulsed in response, the orgasm so close she could taste it. She bit her bottom lip, not sure if this little game they played allowed her to ask for his mouth on her pussy.

“You’re close, aren’t you?” he whispered.

“Yes,” she answered just as quietly, willing herself not to beg. “Shane...”

“Anything you want, honey. You just have to ask.”

Her teeth worried her lower lip again and he smiled up at her. As far as nervous habits went, she suspected it was too telling.

“Please.” She wasn’t above pleading after all it seemed. “Make me come.”

His eyes narrowed. “Not exactly what I had in mind. But I want to taste you bad enough, it’ll do for now.”

It was all the warning she had before his tongue flicked over her clitoris and stars exploded behind her eyes. He didn’t let her come down, drawing the orgasm out over and over again until she begged him to stop, so sensitive she was sure she couldn’t take anymore. By the time he thrust his cock in her, moisture leaked from the corners of her eyes. Stretched over her, his entire length pressed into her, it seemed the most natural scene in the world, despite the ties binding her wrists. His rhythm was steady and languid, the pleasure building through her body again.

When he leaned over and kissed the tears away, the look in his eyes so tender and concerned, something coalesced inside her. This would never be just sex, for either of them. She’d skated the edge of dislike and love with him for years. What would it take to tip the balance to love? His

strokes gradually built to a faster pace that had her pussy clenching around him, the next orgasm seeming to build up from nowhere. She bit her bottom lip to keep from screaming out and his eyes lit with the knowledge. He stopped moving and cupped her face with his hands. She wanted to scream in frustration, a fine tremor running through her body.

“Wrap your legs around my waist, Jessie.”

She did, anticipating movement, but he remained still, holding her gaze a long moment.

“Now let go. I want to hear you when you come.”

When he thrust and withdrew again, he didn’t ease back into it, but started with a hard, fast speed that set every nerve ending in her lower body on fire. She gasped her surprise, wishing she could reach for her clit or that he would. Something to push her over that edge that was just out of reach. He caught her lips in a soft quick kiss then lowered his forehead to the pillow next her, his mouth turned towards her ear.

“I love you, Jessie,” he whispered. “Come for me, honey. Come now.”

Convulsions wracked her body and a high keen drifted from her lips. She didn’t try to hold back—he wouldn’t have let her even if she’d wanted to. She was aware of him stiffening over her and his long groan when he came, but was too caught up in her own pleasure to pay it much attention. Relaxing down into the mattress, her limbs felt limp and rubbery and she drifted on the high of sexual satisfaction.

Chapter Four

He shifted off her and the draft chilled her skin. Reaching for the bedposts, he freed her arms and lay back next to her. On their backs, they were still and stared at the ceiling. The silence made her uncomfortable. She'd never been good at the after sex thing. He picked up the conversational ball for her.

"Tell me what happened today," he ordered, taking her hand in his and rubbing his thumb over her knuckles. The gesture was oddly comforting.

She sighed and started with her late start. He interrupted when she got to the part about turning off the cell phone.

"Don't do that again, Jessie."

She grinned. Like hell. He might think he wanted her compliant or some crap like that, but he'd be bored out of his mind in no time and so would she.

"Bossy, aren't you? You want to hear this or not?"

"You weren't complaining a minute ago."

She choked back a laugh. She hadn't been and was there a way to explain it?

"An aberration that will *never* be repeated outside sex," she said softly, turning her head to see him watching her. "I can run my own life, Shane."

He arched an eyebrow. "Long as you realize I'm part of it."

She did laugh at that. She got the impression she couldn't dislodge him now with her daddy's favorite shotgun.

"Yeah. I think I figured that out all on my own, thanks."

Did he really love her or was it something he said to every woman he slept with? Did she really want to know the answer to that? He lifted her hand to his mouth, turned it over and pressed a kiss to her palm. It wasn't a sexual touch, but it sparked off a fresh wave of arousal. Maybe it was the memory of the other places on her skin those lips had been or the strange effect he'd always had on her. She couldn't begin to guess. He slowly lowered it back to his chest where she felt the increase in his heart rate. He wasn't unaffected either.

"You were telling me what happened."

She was tempted to argue that he already knew, but hurried through her arrival at the gallery and conversation with Sergeant Grey to the afternoon at the hospital. When she finished, he told her about his day. Getting the news someone had been attacked at her gallery, chasing down the information that it wasn't her, and driving out to the lake to get Nancy's father. His voice shook with emotion when he related their conversation and it started to sink in. He really did love her. But how did she feel about him? He fell silent and she blurted out the first thing that came to mind.

"I feel so guilty. I was late and..."

Her words trailed off when he rolled over, crushing her to the bed, trapping her under his much bigger body.

"Don't," he bit out between clenched teeth. "You couldn't have done anything. Could have been hurt just as bad or worse. God, he could have killed you, Jessie."

He drew in a long, shuddering breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them, they flashed at her. "I had a long talk with Dillon. I heard about the courthouse. This guy wants to kill you and Nancy. He's been stalking you. Dillon can keep Nancy safe. That man's as mean as a cornered rattler. And you. You go nowhere alone until McCoy is in custody. If I can't be with you, one of my men will be."

She snorted. "That's crazy, Shane. Following me around here in town is one thing, but what about my other gallery and the fifty miles in between?"

“Don’t remind me.” He almost growled the words. “It’ll probably be a few days before you can go back to the other gallery. Hopefully McCoy will be in jail by then.”

And if he wasn’t? She didn’t ask, didn’t want the fight or anything else right now but sleep. She repressed a yawn and he rolled off her, pulling her back into a spoon position. A nap would be just the thing.

* * *

A week and a half later, McCoy was still on the loose—probably on a beach in Mexico was the prevailing theory. Just in case, one of Shane’s men was staying near Jessie, but he wasn’t answering his radio. Shane’s sixth sense had kicked into high gear, his gut insisting something was wrong.

He searched for her through the evening crowd at the Fourth of July celebration. His Drunk Chicken was such a big hit they ran out early and he had to talk Delores into opening the grocery store for a fast special order. He’d been distracted by the holiday atmosphere, certain Jessie was safe with her escort in the crowd.

And she had been earlier before his stomach suddenly started screaming warnings at him. She’d been dealing with last minute issues with the fireworks vendor. Last he heard there might not be any since the company failed to show up. That was fine by him. It’d been a long day and he could create his own when he got her alone.

Pushing through the crowd, he randomly stopped people to ask if anyone had seen her. His feeling of danger escalated with every negative answer. When he reached the pier, he looked back over the throng of townspeople, certain he hadn’t missed her there. He did a three sixty. Where would she have gone? And did she go willingly? He tried to raise Tom on the radio again and met silence.

He turned again and caught sight of her house a few blocks over. He couldn’t say what drove him—instinct, fear—but suddenly he was running for the house. The back gate was swinging open. Pulling his

gun, he approached cautiously and ducked low when he rounded the corner into the yard. All the outside lights were on, chasing the area free of shadows and once he determined it was clear, he continued to the kitchen door.

It looked like all the lights on the ground floor were on and he knew someone had been there. His crossed the threshold, blood running cold at the sight of his officer laying on the tile floor, a pool of blood under his head. He bent and checked for a pulse, pushing away the wave of sorrow when he got a good look at the back of the kid's head. There would be no recovery for him. Straightening, he hurried through the downstairs rooms. No Jessie. He hesitated at the bottom of the steps, sensing a trap, but saw no other option when he heard the shuffling above him.

Back pressed to the wall, he took each step with care, hoping to avoid giving away his presence in the house. He reached the top and paused. The hall was dark, all the doors closed, except the one at the end. Jessie's room. Light spilled out the open doorway and he slowly went in its direction, gun held up and ready before him. He was several feet up the hall before there was enough light to see the floor in the darkness and the sight made his heart slam in his chest. He stopped and looked behind him. Every couple of feet on the floor down each wall was a stick of dynamite daisy chained together with some kind of wire. He picked up his pace, desperate to find Jessie and get the hell out of the house.

When Shane was halfway down the hall, a tall figure stepped out of the room, dragging Jessalyn with him. He hadn't met McCoy before but recognized him from his pictures. A trickle of blood ran down the side of Jessie's face under a purpling bruise and Shane fought down a surge of rage. He needed to be in control to get them out of this.

McCoy held her in front of him, a gun at her throat, so Shane couldn't get off a clear shot. All that time on a practice range and his life came down to one moment, because she'd become his life. He was an expert shot but he couldn't take the risk of hitting her by mistake. If she was just a little more to the side. Hell, he needed her completely out of the way. He was starting to shake with the adrenalin rush, terror and fury running rampant through his system.

“Let her go, McCoy.”

“Oh, I don’t think so,” he answered.

With a crazy grin, he lifted the gun from her chin and smoothly swung it around. Jessie’s scream rang in his ears and McCoy blasted several rounds at Shane. He dove to the floor behind a long narrow table, thankful the darkened hall behind him made him a less visible target. Fire licked his upper thigh and when he pressed his palm to it, it came away wet. Hit. A stick of dynamite dug into his back. They had to get out of the house. He peeked around the corner of the table, trying to find Jessie in the gloom and was forced to dodge back as another bullet whizzed by his head.

But he saw only McCoy was silhouetted by the bedroom’s light. That could mean she’d managed to get out of the way and hide or that McCoy had already shot her. God help him if he had because Shane would make damned sure he didn’t leave the house alive. Complete silence reigned in the hall.

Where are you, honey?

He heard a shuffling noise and willed her to stay out of the way. Taking a chance it was distracting the crazy man down the hall, he ducked his head around the corner again, edging his upper body out when no shots flew at him. He lifted his arm into position and looked down the barrel of his gun. Remembering his range officer’s warnings to always aim center mass, he took a prone position, resting on his elbows on the floor, and pointed the weapon at McCoy’s chest.

He heard the unmistakable *jack jack* of a shotgun being loaded and in disbelief watched McCoy take a couple of steps up the hall as Jessie walked out of the door with the weapon pointed at his body. Panic, horror, wrath didn’t even begin to touch the emotions exploding through him. The damned woman better be capable of taking that shot. At that range with a shotgun she couldn’t miss, getting past the mental block of taking a life was his main concern. Determined to take the choice from her, certain she wouldn’t be able to live with that kind of decision, he rose to his feet, gasping in pain at the pressure on his leg. It was all the

warning McCoy needed and he whirled, firing. The shot went high and Shane dove to the floor again and, in the same seconds, heard the booming report of the shotgun. Ears ringing, he lifted his head to see Jessie staring down at a very dead McCoy.

“Never piss off a Southern woman, you idiot,” she muttered.

Shane laughed out loud, gingerly getting to his feet. He walked—staggered really—over, took the gun out of her loose grip and propped it against the wall before pulling her into a hard embrace. He was never letting her out of his sight again. Better yet, he was chaining her to his side. She owed him that much after scaring twenty years off of his life. She pushed at his chest and he looked down at her face to see her gaze sweeping the hall.

“Um, Shane. I think we need to get out of here. Like now.”

He followed her gaze, taking in the dynamite and something near McCoy’s hand caught his eye. He stepped towards it and looked down.

“Shit.”

Grabbing her hand he ran/limped for the stairs. If he was reading the timer right, they had about three minutes to get clear of the house. Downstairs, he went for the front door and dragged her down the front walk and across the street towards the beach. His leg was a twisted knot of pain, but he wasn’t sure how far away they needed to get, so he pushed through it. There was a hell of a lot of dynamite up there. He headed for the nearby pier. The pylons holding it up were the best cover available.

He pulled her down a short dune and into the water, hurrying to pull her behind the reinforced concrete just in time. He felt the blast first—hot air rushed around them and the ground swelled. The concussion tossed them in the water and then the loud cracking *boom* reverberated through the air. Jessie stood and faced him, shaking her head and mouthing words he didn’t hear over the ringing in his ears. She blinked, a panicked look crossing her face.

He squeezed her hand, trying to reassure without the words that the hearing loss would pass, and pulled them out of the water and up on to

the beach. By the time they reached street level, emergency lights were heading towards the house. He felt her outrage, saw her hands clench and jaw harden. Her house—her grandfather's house—was gone. He found an officer with a notebook and started scribbling directions keeping a wary eye her, but unable to break through the shell she erected. His heart twisted. After the night she'd had, he might never manage it.

Chapter Five

Three days later

“Dammit, where’s my coffee?”

Shane bit back a growl as he yelled into the outer office, but shit, he was at the end of his rope. The state police were still crawling up his ass about the two bodies and blown up house in his town, and he was sleeping alone. If Jessie didn’t come back soon, he was sending out a search party.

He grunted. He knew exactly where she was. Nancy and Dillon called him with daily reports, but *she* didn’t. The way he heard it, she didn’t do much of anything. She wasn’t talking her friends and she wasn’t working. Her hearing had returned and the bruises on her face were healing, but the psychological trauma? A man had tried to kill her, she’d killed him, and he still managed to blow up her house. Recovering from that would not be near so swift as the physical wounds.

His own recovery wasn’t aided by his refusal to stay in the hospital and recuperate. Hell, he’d lost a layer of skin, bled like a stuck pig but there was no serious damage done. He could swallow a pain pill in his office just as easily as from a hospital bed. At least he got work done in the office. He looked at the files and papers piled haphazardly around the room. Or not.

Where the fuck was his coffee?

He stood and walked into the squad room, grinding his back teeth when the room immediately emptied. Enough of this shit. He stalked, as well as he could with a limp, out of the building. When he reached his

car, he yanked the door open, slid in and turned the key left in the ignition.

She wanted to shut him out? She could at least have the courtesy to do it to his face. He fumed the entire time, imagining the things he'd like to say to her that weren't begging her to come home. Dillon met him on the front porch and grinned up at him from a rocking chair.

"Bout time you showed up, boy."

Shane grunted. "She inside?"

He shook his head. "Down on the dock."

The yard sloped down to the lake and a long wood plank dock extended out over the water. He saw her standing alone on the end and stood a moment arrested by the view. Her long hair flew in the breeze and the last rays of the setting sun haloed her. Pleased by the angel, *his angel*, he broke into a trot, his feet landing heavily on the wood planks.

Jessalyn turned at the sound of a heavy tread on the boards and watched Shane approach. *He came*. Her heart soared and immediately plummeted. Sometime in the last few days, she'd accepted she loved the man. She'd also decided she was completely wrong for him.

They stared at each other, separated by mere feet and a chasm that felt a mile wide. Her heart ached. But, damn it, she wouldn't cry. She'd faced down a madman and survived. She would make it through this too. He didn't start off the way she expected, though his bossiness didn't come as a surprise.

"I came to take you home."

She swallowed the lump in her throat. "I don't have a home anymore, remember?"

He scowled, crossing his arms over his chest.

"What are you talking about? A Banks has always lived in Banks Crossing. The whole town's driving me crazy wanting to know when you're coming home." He paused and added softly, "*I'm* going crazy wanting to know when you're coming home."

She blinked up at him, resisting the urge to leap into his arms. That would just prolong the inevitable. He didn't really see her as she was and she didn't want to spend a lifetime, or whatever, fighting him. Plus, he was the police chief. How did it look for him to be involved with a killer? Okay, it was justified but it still looked bad. Especially the rest of it.

She kept her voice low and steady. "I don't regret it, you know. Shooting Derek? I'm supposed to regret taking a life, right? But I don't. He was a lousy excuse for human being and was going to kill us."

Shane didn't respond, just watched her with a shuttered expression, and she smiled a little.

"You think you want...me, I guess. This image you have of me hiding who I really am? But I don't, Shane. You just refuse to really see me."

He was in front of her before she could finish her next breath, his mouth stealing the oxygen from hers. His lips and tongue and teeth stealing her resolve. Her knees went weak and his hands gripped her hips, pulling her tight against his hard cock. He stopped abruptly and she lurched back, her fingers lingering over her lips. For a minute she'd been ready to throw away all her reservations, all her conviction they were just plain wrong for each other. How did the man do it?

His eyes narrowed at her retreat.

"I know you, Jessie. You took your mother's little hobby art gallery when you were eighteen and turned it into a successful business. At the same time you took her spot on every charity and civic board in this county and some in the next. You give your time and your money generously. You helped your best friend leave the bastard she was married to and when he came after you, you did what you had to do. I don't want to change you, Jessie. I just want to help you. I just want to share your life."

Stunned, she stared at him, not daring to move. Maybe he knew her better than she thought. It even sounded like he accepted who she was.

He sighed and ran a hand over his head.

“We can rebuild the house. Or put a park there. I have a house. We can buy a new house. Hell, I don’t care. Just come home with me, Jessie. I can’t take much more of this.”

Looking closer at him, she noticed the new lines etched around his eyes, the weariness that hung over him. His leg must be bothering him, but he stood strong and proud, not favoring it in the slightest. *He may not be perfect, but he’s perfect for you*, a voice whispered in her mind. How could she ignore it? She stepped closer to him, still searching his face, and lifted her hand. Her thumb rubbed over his full lower lip and she lifted on her toes to nibble it.

His mouth crushed hers in a quick bruising kiss.

“I’m never letting you out of my sight again,” he whispered and she laughed, her heart feeling light for the first time in days.

“Haven’t we had this conversation already?” she joked.

“I mean it this time.”

She cupped his face in her palms and smiled up at him. “I love you.”

His answering grin was slow. He picked her up and spun them around in a circle when he answered.

“I know.”

About the Author

To learn more about Loribelle Hunt, please visit www.loribellehunt.com. Send an email to Lori@loribellehunt.com or join her Google group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Loribelle! <http://groups.google.com/group/loribelle-hunt>

An old-fashioned undertaker who asks for lessons in what turns a woman on...what more could any teacher ask for?

Mortified Matchmaker

© 2007 Alexis Fleming

When circumstances force kindergarten teacher Melissa Morgan to take her twin sister's place as proprietor of a dating agency, the last thing she expects is to meet a funeral director in desperate need of lessons in what a woman wants. Despite his quirky behavior and antiquated ideas, Matthew Campbell pushes every one of Melissa's buttons and it's not long before the lessons become more important than finding Matthew a mate.

But how will Melissa react when she finds out Matthew is an undercover federal agent in pursuit of a blackmailer and she's the prime suspect?

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Mortified Matchmaker*:

"Make yourself comfortable, Matthew, and I'll put the first of the tapes on."

Wobbling slightly as the unfamiliar high heels caught in the thick pile of the carpet, she moved to the far end of the room, slid the video into the machine and turned on the television. Remote control in hand, she joined Matthew on the sofa and started the tape.

"This first lady's name is Martha Frazer. She's perhaps a little older than you specified on your application form, but she sounds very much a homebody. Anyway, I'll let you view the tape and you can tell me what you think."

As Matthew watched the screen, Melissa tried to find a comfortable position on the sofa. With it being so wide, she couldn't lean back against the cushions. If she did, she'd have to sit with her legs extended out in front of her like a child. Not very professional.

Neither was the flash of garters high on her thighs as she tried to perch on the extreme edge of the sofa. She tugged at the hemline of her skirt, only to have it ride up again as soon as she released it. Hell, at this rate, she'd be forced to sit with both hands on the bottom of her skirt to keep it in place.

As the video ended, she turned to Matthew, an enquiring look on her face. "So what do you think?"

Matt tried not to grin as her skirt slid up to expose the top of her nylons and gave him a quick glimpse of naked thigh. He'd seen her efforts to tweak it down. If she didn't want her legs on show, why wear such short skirts?

The character Joshua Cribbs had created for him foremost in his mind, Matt clasped his hands together and lowered his chin to tap at his pursed lips with pointed index fingers. "Hmm, she sounds a very nice lady," he said.

"But?"

"I'm not certain she's suitable. Very unfashionable and a lot older than I wanted. Probably set in her ways. Not malleable at all. I don't think I'd be able to mold her into what I perceive as the perfect partner."

He knew his words sounded chauvinistic, but it suited his undercover identity. With his Italian heritage, he was used to a culture where women were revered, feted and looked after. Although that in itself sounded chauvinistic, the women in his family were strong and independent, equal partners in any relationship.

Still, he had a part to play and somehow he had to get Mel Morgan to take him personally under her wing, not fob him off on one of her clients. If he took these women on a date and screwed it up, maybe they'd report back to Melissa. Then he could suggest she teach him how to romance a woman. He couldn't think of any other way to get close enough to Miss Morgan to find out what he needed to know.

"You know, perhaps I've been going about this the wrong way. I think I need someone more glamorous. I'd like to lift the profile of my business, and as I'd want any prospective partner to work with me, at least until

the children come, perhaps I should have someone a bit more..." His voice trailed off for a moment. "I guess sophisticated is the word I'm looking for."

"Let's try the next one then, shall we? This woman's name is Janice Betonie. She certainly looks more the part."

Melissa struggled to her feet, almost catching her heel again in the loop of the carpet. She could have sworn she felt the burn of Matthew's gaze on her rear end as she walked over to change the tape.

It made the sway of her hips feel more exaggerated than normal. Made her aware of her body in a way she never had been before. Why this should be, she didn't know. She certainly wasn't comfortable with the man. Despite that, something about him made her pulse beat faster. Made the blood rush through her veins and generated a fire she hadn't felt in a long time.

For crying out loud, the man was an undertaker of all things. How could she be turned on by someone who dealt in dead bodies?

Regardless of his job, he was as sexy as hell, even with all that grease in his hair. One thing, though, he'd have to change his chauvinistic attitudes. In this day and age no woman would put up with his comments. He was already at a disadvantage, what with his strange mannerisms and the disastrous hair oil. Although the way she felt, she'd even put up with that.

Damn, this wasn't like her at all. She was acting completely out of character. *You're the responsible one, remember, Melissa?* Yeah, goody-two-shoes as her sister would say. So what the hell was wrong with her?

Her brain had gone on vacation. Because right about now, she had one thought and one thought only in her mind. Throw Matthew Campbell down on his back and fuck the living daylights out of him.

Oh my gawd, she was in serious trouble here. She needed to get her mind off her body and onto the business of finding Matthew Campbell a partner.

Matt tried to keep his attention focused on the television screen, but he couldn't help a sneaky sideways glance at the exposed length of

Melissa's legs. She'd either forgotten, or given up, trying to stretch her skirt down. One pale pink, lacy garter peeked out beneath the hemline. On the very end, in what appeared to be silky satin, was a darker pink embroidered rose.

He had a sudden urge to reach out and run his finger over it to check. It took all his self-discipline to ignore the unschooled impulse. He averted his gaze and stared at the screen.

"My name is Janice Betonie and I'm..."

The woman on the screen had a well-modulated, husky voice, but she couldn't hold his interest. Matt tuned out the sound and allowed his attention and his gaze to slide back to the woman beside him. Her skirt had risen another inch. He caught a peek of pale skin above the rose-embossed garter.

X-rated images leapt into his brain, scrambling his thought processes. Heat slammed into him, sliding through his veins and igniting a hungry need inside him. He itched to run his fingers over that strip of skin and see if it felt as soft as it looked. He wanted to taste the creamy texture, slide his tongue across the silky softness and trace the garter up her thigh until he came to her pussy.

He imagined himself down on his knees, head buried between those creamy thighs. Tongue probing at the slick folds of her sex. Then he'd spread her lips and play with her clit until she screamed and begged him to delve deep to taste her honey.

His cock tightened, all the blood driven from his brain and collecting in that wayward piece of male equipment. A raging boner pushed at the front of his trousers. He dropped his hands over his lap to hide the telltale bulge. Thank God he'd worn a suit today and not his normal skin-tight jeans. Shit, he had to stop this, but first...

He leaned closer and dragged in a deep breath. Light, floral perfume teased at his senses. Funny, given the glossy photo back at the office, he would have staked a bet she'd use a heavy musky scent. But he liked this better. Somehow, it suited her. Made a fellow think of innocence and...

Hang on a minute, man, he remonstrated with himself. This woman is anything but innocent. She's the subject of an undercover investigation and you'd better remember that. Get your mind out of your pants and onto your work.

As the videotape came to an end, he plastered what he hoped was an interested look on his face. He kept his gaze glued to the blank screen as if deep in thought when Melissa turned toward him.

"What do you think, Matthew? Are you interested?"

Fucked if I know. I didn't take in anything but the first sentence the woman uttered. "Hmm, it's so hard to make a decision based on a video image."

"Perhaps you should meet Janice, go out with her and see how you feel. I'm sure you'll have a great time with her and once you've had a successful date, you'll have much more confidence in your dating skills. You're a good-looking man. Any woman would be happy to be seen with you. Would you like me to ring her?"

Matt stood and stepped away from the sofa. Even from here, Melissa's perfume reached out to him and made his cock twitch in reaction. "Yes, perhaps that would be best. Meet the woman in the flesh, so to speak. Dial away, my dear lady."

Somehow he had to get Miss Morgan to take him under her wing personally, not fob him off on some other unsuspecting female. How else was he going to find out if she was a part of this blackmailing scam? Time to turn on the pathos.

A battle begins between Shane, who knows what he wants and Cassie who does everything she can tries to keep a distance between herself and the very handsome sheriff.

But Cassie's ex is back and he wants her dead.

Taking Chase

© 2006 Lauren Dane

Now Available in ebook and print.

Cassie Gambol is on the run. In what seems like another lifetime, her ex-husband nearly ended her life and effectively ended her successful career as a vascular surgeon. But even though the justice system found him guilty of attempted murder, he fled while awaiting sentencing and Carly Sunderland became Cassie Gambol.

Fleeing Los Angeles, she heads to small and off the map Petal, Georgia to start her life again.

Shane Chase, a man who's held himself away from commitment since his fiancée dumped him several years before knows the beautiful newcomer is hiding something. He's wildly attracted to her strength and her underlying vulnerability as well.

The last thing Cassie wants is another big, overwhelming man who wants to control her life. A battle begins between Shane, who knows what he wants and Cassie, who knows she needs to do everything she can to keep a distance between herself and the very handsome sheriff.

But Cassie's ex is back and he wants her dead.

Book Two of the Chase Brothers

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Taking Chase*:

"I'm gonna kiss you now, Cassie Gambol."

"Why? I mean, why do you want me? I don't understand it. I can't lie and tell you I don't know you've been regarded as a player here in Petal. I

like men, yes, but I'm afraid of being a casual indulgence to a man like you."

"There's not a damned thing about the way I feel about you that's casual. Now, I've been dying to do this for so long." He closed the last bit of distance between them and he brushed his mouth over hers. His lips were lush and delicious, spicy and masculine, just like the rest of him. They both groaned as he moved away.

"Cassie, you fascinate me. I'm shocked by how much I want you. I think I started wanting you when you kicked my ass at pool. No, I'm a damned liar. Since you stumbled out of your wrecked car and called my momma Crash." He put his face into her neck and inhaled deeply. "God, you smell good."

"Shampoo, sweat and a little bit of Delice," she breathed out, running her tongue over the lips he'd just touched with his own. A sense of unreality washed over her. The connection between them was warm and sticky. Lethargic with want, she let him hold her against his body. The heat of him blanketed her skin. Her nipples hardened against the wall of his chest and a libido that she'd thought beaten out of her roared back to life. There was a moment where she wondered if she was dreaming. Hell, if it wasn't she sure didn't want to wake up.

"Mmm." He licked his lips as she'd just done and a shiver ran through her. "You taste good, too. Better than you should. I ought to be running out the door but damned if you don't make me want things I'd thought I'd never want with a woman again."

His hand rested at the small of her back, hot and inescapably present. The other rested on her shoulder. He held her in his orbit physically and mentally. His presence was so intense it boggled her mind. Things tightened low in her gut as her skin tingled everywhere he touched her. And yet, aside from general nervousness, she wasn't afraid.

She caught her lip in her teeth and he groaned softly. "I know you want me too." Leaning in, he pressed a hot, wet kiss to the hollow just below her ear. "I can feel your nipples against my chest," he murmured, breath stirring the wisps of hair around her ear. His tongue darted inside

and then he caught the lobe between his teeth. She shivered, going weak in the knees. "But I want more than your physical need of me. Let's have dinner. Some snuggling on your couch. A liberal smattering of smooches. Let me get to know you as a woman."

"I...yes." She nodded, incapable of further speech. Especially when his grin widened and he looked like a predator.

They sat down and began to dish up the food, digging in. He watched her and she laughed. "What? Do I have a bean spout between my teeth?"

"No," he chuckled. "I just like the way you look here with me." He shrugged. "And I like that you eat. Not like some dainty thing who wants everyone to believe she survives on air and mist, but you eat like a real person."

"Is that your finessed way of telling me I eat like a pig?"

He threw his head back and laughed. "Oh the unwinnable guy question. Darlin' you do not eat like a pig. You eat like a human who likes to eat. I *like* that."

She narrowed her eyes at him for a moment and shrugged before going back to her plate. She'd only just put the weight on she lost from the hospital and afterwards in the last three months or so.

They kept a wide berth around what happened the night before but Cassie was pretty sure Maggie had told him about Terry. He didn't seem freaked, which made her more comfortable.

After they'd eaten, he helped her clean up and get the dishes in the dishwasher before they retired to the couch.

"Let's get comfortable here, shall we, darlin'?" Because I have some serious smooching planned and we should do it right." He winked and pulled her into his lap, her body straddling his.

The hard ridge of his cock fit up against her and she undulated, grinding herself over him without even thinking of it. Little flares of pleasure played up her spine and the muscles inside her pussy fluttered and contracted.

One of his eyebrows rose slowly and his hands slid to rest at her waist. "So that's how it's gonna be, huh? Mmm. You feel so damned

good, Cassie. I need to kiss you again.” Arching his neck up, he brought his lips to hers with crushing intensity.

Her head swam as she drowned in him. In a myriad of ways he affected her, overwhelmed her, turned her on and turned her out. Helpless to do anything more than hang on, she slid her hands up his chest and neck and into his hair. The soft, cool silk of it flowed over her skin, his skull solid and sure beneath her palms.

Grunting in satisfaction, he slanted his mouth to get more of her. His tongue slipped in between her teeth and he tasted her, met her warmth with his own. Her elemental flavor rocked him, he couldn’t get enough. When she sucked at his tongue, he pulled her to him tighter and delighted in the moan that came from her lips. Swallowed it down with the rest of her that he took from the kiss.

God he wanted more. The luscious flesh of her bottom lip seduced him as he sucked it into his mouth. Arching into him with a breathy sigh, she traced the outline of his upper lip with the tip of her tongue. Down over the seam of his mouth where her lip was captured, the wetness of her tongue, the tentative and yet utterly carnal way she responded, drew him in.

It’d never been like this with a woman before. Intense, sure. Really good, that too. But so good, so right that it made his chest ache with want and need of *this* woman in his arms? Never.

Damn, he was falling for Cassie. Scratch that—had *fallen* for Cassie and he wasn’t running. No, he wanted more. Wanted to gorge himself on every drop of her he could get as long as he could get it. He wanted to see what kind of tomorrow he could build with this woman. Cassie Gambol wasn’t a casual indulgence at all, she was big league addiction and instead of fear, there was only joy that he’d found it at last.

It took every bit of his self control to keep his hands resting at her waist instead of sliding down to cup her ass. She was so soft against him, so warm and pliant—everything sexy and earthy, he wanted to take her in the grass under the moon, the dew on his naked skin as he

watched her in the silvery light. She was a goddess come alive in his arms.

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