



MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S STEAM

HEAT WAVE

BLACKBERRY PIE

BONNIE DEE

SAMHAIN publishing, Ltd.

“Blackberry Pie”

by Bonnie Dee

A young minister’s celibacy is challenged by an earthy, Appalachian woman.

A Midsummer Night’s Steam story

On a blistering summer afternoon, Reverend Nathan Andrews climbs a mountain to meet backwoods members of his congregation. Fresh from seminary, the young man isn’t prepared for the onslaught of lust that hits him when he encounters a sensuous girl picking blackberries.

Determined to implement his outreach plan, he helps her harvest the fruit. But their potent sexual chemistry is too intense to deny and they engage in passionate sex surrounded by the beauty of nature.

Grace is earthy and primal, the opposite of the proper young lady he expects to take as a wife some day. Can there possibly be a future for a college-educated minister and a primitive mountain girl?

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language.

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Blackberry Pie

Bonnie Dee

Dedication

Thanks to all friends and family who have been supportive of my writing
obsession

Chapter One

When he first glimpsed her out of the corner of his eye, he thought she was a forest animal, a deer foraging for food. If he looked at it directly, the wild creature would crash through the undergrowth and disappear into the emerald depths of the woods. His gaze swung toward the movement in the briar patch and focused, but she didn't run.

A pair of deep brown doe eyes stared back at him. The animal frozen among the brambles was human. The sun shone on the crown of her dark brown hair, picking out strands of gold and red. The tangled, curly mane spilled around her thin face and down her back. Sweaty tendrils stuck to her forehead and fell across one eye.

Her eyes drew him back again. They dominated her small face so much that he scarcely noticed the elegant, high bridge of her nose or bowed upper lip of her mouth.

Nathan's gaze slipped from her eyes to her body. The girl wore a sleeveless dress of fabric so thin it clung to her like a second skin. The shift may once have been colorful, but was now so faded and threadbare it was a dingy off-white. But the cheap, cotton dress was merely a setting for a precious stone. The girl's slender arms, sharp collarbones and long neck were a warm tan against the pale fabric. Underneath the translucent material pressed the swell of her breasts and the small, hard shape of nipples.

Inside his sober black pants, so very hot from absorbing the sun's rays, Nathan's cock stiffened. Ashamed of his brazen perusal of her body and its

effect on him, his gaze snapped back up to her face. The girl's wide eyes held a glitter of inherent awareness, although perhaps it was only reflected sunlight.

The exchange transpired in moments, but felt like an eternity in which they were suspended like ants in amber.

Sweat trickled down Nathan's spine, itchy and tickling. The armpits of his shirt were wet and, after an hour of rambling through the wilderness, he wished he'd worn one with short sleeves. His black jacket was draped over one arm. He'd abandoned it after the first twenty minutes of hiking. His clerical collar was tucked in one of the jacket's pockets.

The open glade in the woods was somnolent with heat, the air so thick and muggy a person could drown in it. He hadn't known the mountains in summer would be so humid. Back at seminary he'd pictured the Blue Ridge much differently than it actually was—more Alps than Appalachia.

The amber moment had run its course. Nathan needed to speak before the silence grew any more awkward. He stretched the corners of his mouth up into a smile. "Hello." He half-expected the wild-looking girl to startle at the sound of his voice and bound off into the woods.

"How-do." She inclined her head as slowly and graciously as a queen accepting her subject's homage.

"I'm the new minister, Reverend Nathan Andrews." He moved a few steps toward her, but was confronted by a thicket of blackberry briars and had to stop. "I'm out today, hoping to meet some of the community." *The non-church-attending backwoods members of my congregation.*

"Mm." Her eyes scanned him up and down more leisurely and lingering than he had dared look at her. "Might hot for visitin', ain't it?"

His smile became more sincere. "Yes, it is. But I've found when it's not steaming hot here, it's pouring rain. This seemed slightly more agreeable weather."

The girl walked toward him, passing carefully through the briars without once snagging her clothes. She stopped when she stood only a few feet from him. "Ain't you young for a preacher?"

He could smell her hot skin, her ripe, feminine sweat, not unpleasant but natural and heady as catnip. Scratches marked her arms in thin, long streaks. A wooden bucket dangled from one of her hands. It was half-filled with deep purple berries. Nathan glanced down at her bare legs and feet under the hem of her dress. More scratches and dusty grime coated her high-arched feet and lean, brown legs.

Again he brought his attention back to her face. "I just graduated in spring. Class of '34. This is my first church."

She nodded, looked at his black coat and white shirt, which had been crisply ironed when he put it on that morning, then back to his face again. "I'm Grace."

"Pleased to meet you, Grace." He extended his hand to shake hers.

She stared at it a moment before taking it. Her slim hand was warm and damp with sweat. He supposed his was too. Her palm was hard with calluses, not soft and delicate as it appeared. Her fingers curled around his hand and released it slowly like vines clinging to a trellis. Nathan felt the ghostly pressure of her hand even after it was gone. An electric tingling vibrated through his flesh.

"Blackberry?" She held up her bucket. The sweet aroma that had teased his senses since he entered the glade rose strong and potent from the mass of fruit.

"Thank you." He reached into the bucket and picked a berry. It was pulpy and moist from the heat. He nodded at the girl and popped the fruit into his mouth where it burst, syrupy and rich. Hard seeds crunched in contrast to the mushy flesh of the fruit.

She watched him chew. Her gleaming eyes made the act seem too intimate, as if he was doing something other than eating in front of her. Although the bite of berry was small, Nathan swallowed hard. “Very sweet. Thank you,” he said again.

“This ’ere’s the best patch around.” The girl lifted a berry to her own mouth. Her indigo-stained tongue slipped out between rosy lips. She placed the berry on her tongue and drew it slowly back inside.

Nathan watched, mesmerized, searching for something to say, but his mind was completely blank. Pleasantries like asking about her family, where she lived, whether she ever attended the Grace Baptist Church—which ironically shared her name—all that was beyond him. He could only stare at her moving mouth and the subtle fluctuation in her throat as she swallowed. His erection swelled harder and he backed away a step, looking past Grace at the blackberry patch. “What will you make with the berries?”

“Preserves and pie.” She reached into her bucket and selected another berry. Her eyes sparkled like the sun on a dark pool as she extended her hand toward his mouth. If chewing in front of her had felt intimate, the offering from her fingers directly to his lips was downright erotic. Her eyes challenged him to open his mouth and accept the fruit, and he couldn’t refuse it without looking like a flustered fool.

He opened his mouth, throat dry as sandpaper, and felt the feather-light touch of her fingers brushing his lips and the berry settling on his tongue.

She smiled as she withdrew her hand and let it drop back to her side.

Nathan’s heart pounded like a blacksmith’s hammer. His cheeks blazed with heat and blood rushed in his ears. His cock throbbed in time to his rapid heartbeats. The glade’s heat seemed intensified, smothering. Nathan’s head swam and he wondered if he was about to pass out—all because a country girl hand-fed him a blackberry.

A charge like ionized air before a thunderstorm smoldered between them for several seconds before the girl broke it by speaking. "Must be thirsty from all the walkin'. There's a stream over yonder." She pointed toward the woods on the far side of the glade.

"Yes, water would be good," he agreed weakly.

"Best come 'round the patch lessen you want to get your nice clothes all ruined." She turned and walked in front of him, hips swaying slightly from side to side.

It took every ounce of Nathan's willpower to drag his gaze away from the undulations of her hips and buttocks and the long, lean legs stretching down below the short hem of her shift.

"You been to Cadey's Pass, seen the family up there yet?" she asked as she led him up a slope and through a stand of pine trees. He heard the trickling of water and his mouth salivated in response.

"Um, no. I had directions, but got lost on the way."

"Easy to get twisted 'round on the mountain." Her light voice drifted back over her shoulder, rising up and down with a musical lilt.

"Where do you live?" he finally remembered to ask. "What's your last name?"

"Owl Ridge over yonder. Last name's Parkins." She stopped walking suddenly and Nathan ran into her. He stepped back so quickly he tripped on a branch half-buried in the leaf mold. It took him a few stumbling steps to regain his balance.

"Here." She crouched and pushed back a tall clump of ferns to reveal water bubbling right up out of the ground and meandering away in a thin stream. "It's plenty cold." She lay down on her belly and bent her face to the surface of the water.

Nathan could hardly breath, watching her natural ease as she sprawled on the ground and scooped water to her mouth. Her dress rode even higher,

revealing a lightly haired expanse of leg all the way up to the rounded shadow where her thighs met her bottom. He swallowed the hard lump in his throat and raised his eyes to the canopy of green leaves above them. This was a test—surely a test from God of Nathan’s dedication to the ideal of chastity.

Back in the seminary it had been easy to talk analytically with his peers about moral and spiritual matters. The seminarians all expected to work in the mission field for a year or two, return home to meet and marry a suitable young woman and begin life as a family man. Full of religious fervor and the desire to grow new spiritual communities, none of them considered delaying sexual gratification a problem. The young men had been celibate so long, what was another year or two? But out in the world, Nathan had discovered working with real people was considerably more complicated than he’d anticipated, and today’s sudden, unexpected and powerful surge of physical desire for a strange young woman took him completely by surprise.

“Ain’t you thirsty?”

He looked down at Grace. She had pushed up off the ground and squatted by the water, looking up at him, her lips glistening wet. Her hair was darker here in the shadows with no sun highlighting it. Her eyes looked darker too. She gazed at him over one bare shoulder, the sleeve of her shift having slipped down her arm. The vulnerability of the soft curve of flesh made his heart twist. She looked like a young girl wearing her older sister’s too-large dress.

“Yes,” he finally answered her question. He dropped to his knees on the leafy forest floor, setting his jacket aside. With one hand pressed flat to the ground, he lowered his face close to the bubbling stream and scooped icy cold handfuls of water to his mouth. The sharp mineral tang soothed his throat and cooled his raging libido a little—until he turned his head and faced Grace’s eyes, only a couple of feet away, looking back into his.

She smiled and her eyes crinkled at the corners, her lashes making a long, lacy fringe around them. Her full lips parted to reveal a flash of white teeth

then closed again, as she regarded him solemnly, her gaze lingering on his mouth. For one heart-stopping moment, Nathan thought she was going to lean in and kiss him, but she sat back on her heels, hands resting on her lap.

Nathan sat too, closing his eyes for a moment to gather his senses before he looked at her again. When he opened them, she was still there, not a fairytale sprite of the woods, but a flesh and blood young woman with dirty feet and berry-stained fingers.

“Don’t get many visitors up here,” she said. “How long you been preaching at the church?”

“Almost two months. It’s taken me some time to get around to meeting the whole community. Families are spread out all over the mountain.”

Grace laughed. “And half of ’em got some grudge or feud goin’ on with the other half. You can’t spit for fear of rilin’ somebody.” She shook her head. “Best to try an’ keep out of it, but tain’t enough for people to get mad at each other—they want everybody to choose up sides.”

Nathan smiled, feeling easier as her talk filled the awkward silence. “It doesn’t make my job easy, trying to convince people to ‘turn the other cheek’.”

Grace rose to her feet, extending a hand to him. He couldn’t refuse to take it without appearing rude. She grasped his hand firmly and pulled him to his feet with more strength in her slim body than he would have guessed. She continued holding his hand and looking up at him.

Almost a head shorter than he, Grace made Nathan feel big and masculine, words he didn’t usually associate with himself. His mind had been immersed in books and theology for so long, he’d forgotten what it was like to indulge in more sensual pursuits. Something as simple as holding a girl’s hand or enjoying a sweet blackberry on a hot day took on an aspect of sinful pleasure. “Well...thank you for the water. It was very refreshing. I suppose I’d better be going.”

A flicker of something crossed her eyes, disappointment or maybe nothing but a shadow caused by a fluttering leaf overhead. “You could tarry a while.” Her voice was low and soft. “Pick blackberries with me. Or, iffen you don’t care to dirty your clothes, you could talk to me while I pick.”

Nathan dragged his gaze away from her mesmerizing eyes, glanced up the mountain then back at her. “I should be getting on. I’ve a number of stops I intended to make today.”

“Ain’t I one of the folks you came up here to meet?” Releasing his hand, she raised an eyebrow and folded her arms beneath her breasts. The shape and color of her dark nipples pressed against the almost transparent, limp fabric.

He blinked and looked away. “I—I suppose you are at that.” His quick, sharp smile was almost a grimace. He felt he was standing on a precipice and the edge was crumbling underneath his feet.

“I’ll send some berries home with you. Who’s keepin’ house for you?”

“Um, Mrs. Crowder. She cooks and cleans.”

“She can make you a cobbler.” Allowing no further argument, Grace took his hand in hers and pulled him through the patch of woods to the clearing again.

Chapter Two

Out from under the shelter of trees, the heat trapped in the little hollow of weeds and blackberry brambles was oppressive. The sun bore down on the crown of Nathan's head like a heavy hand weighing on him. He pushed his hand through his sweaty, brown hair, lifting it from his scalp so the air could pass through it. He should've immersed his whole head in the spring water. That would've kept him cool for a while.

"Too hot? You can set under yonder tree if you'd care to."

"No. I'll help you pick." Nathan had decided the best way to gain trust as a minister was to show his flock he would work alongside them. A spiritual laborer shouldn't be too proud to physically labor with his congregation on occasion.

"Then best remove your shirt. Blackberry stains don't never come out."

Nathan hesitated, torn between the logic of her words and the inappropriateness of being half-garbed, alone with a woman. Finally he unbuttoned his shirt, shrugged it off and laid it with his jacket underneath a tree. Wearing only a sleeveless T-shirt, he felt instantly cooler—and conversely hotter. A brush of air touched his bare arms and neck, but so did Grace's eyes, sending hot licks of fire through him.

She handed him an empty bucket. "I done this patch over here. Y'might try just over there." She indicated where he should pick and Nathan obediently moved to the clump of bushes. The berries were clustered high on the canes,

but Grace cautioned him to check beneath the leaves as well. “Ever picked blackberries afore?”

“No, but I harvested vegetables in my mother’s garden and picked apples at my uncle’s farm every fall.”

“Where y’all from?”

“Michigan.”

She nodded. “Yankee. Thought your talk was strange. How’d you come here?”

“I graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary and there were job postings for mountain churches in need of pastors. I’d never been south before. I wanted to see the mountains and minister to a congregation in need.” He didn’t tell her it was also because he’d been told the mission was a difficult outreach, the mountain people stubborn and resistant to change, and Nathan had wanted the challenge.

She moved closer to him, pulling aside a thorny branch and showing him ripe clusters he’d missed. “Y’all like it down here?”

“The mountains are beautiful, and the people have been...very welcoming.”

She looked up at him with a skeptically raised eyebrow. “Doubtful you been up at Cadey’s Pass or down in Possum Holler then.”

He smiled. “All right, I’ll admit some members of the community haven’t appreciated a stranger in their midst. I’m sure, given time, they’ll get used to me.”

She laughed and copied his accent flawlessly. “Given twenty years or so perhaps.” Resuming her southern twang, she added, “But I don’t reckon you’re plannin’ on stayin’ that long.”

“I doubt it,” he admitted.

For a short while silence fell between them as they moved about the berry patch under the hot August sun. Only a blackbird’s musical trill and the whine of an occasional mosquito near Nathan’s ear disturbed the quiet. His fingers

were soon purple-tipped and his hands covered with scratches from the lethal thorns on the blackberry canes. No matter how careful he was, he kept brushing against them, snagging their barbs on his skin. The jagged scratches stung from his salty sweat.

Soon the bottom of Nathan's bucket was covered with several inches of fruit. He glanced at Grace, intent on her picking, and decided he should make an attempt at ministering since that was what he was here for after all. "So, Grace, does your family ever attend church? I haven't seen you there yet. I know it's quite a distance for you."

"Distance ain't the problem. Somethin' you gotta understand, preacher. The folks at the bottom of the mountain is one kind, but up here on the ridge we have our own way of doin' things. We don't tend toward church-goin' much. Leastways not me."

"Why not?" His hand rested on the rim of the tin pail as he watched her hands move briskly and efficiently over the canes, harvesting berries.

"Got my momma's bible for readin' from, but I'd rather spend time with God out here on a Sunday"—she gestured up at the clear blue sky above them—"stead of in a church buildin'."

"But you believe in God."

"Shore. How could a body look around and not?" She faced him, setting her bucket down at her feet then pushing her hair back behind her ears. "Look at all this. And you. And me." She gave him a smile that didn't quite reach her solemn eyes. "Reckon God had a hand in it."

Indeed, he thought, his breath stolen by the girl's beauty. Her tangled hair was a wild, dark halo around her head. Her eyes were shiny, obsidian pools, depthless and secretive. And her mouth...if he walked two steps closer and inclined his head, he could cover her lush lips with his. He fought against the powerful urge, shoving it down inside him.

Then suddenly the struggle was removed from his hands as Grace took the two steps toward him and laid her hand on his chest. He felt her warm touch through the thin cotton of his undershirt. She must be able to feel his chest rising and falling and his heart beating like a jackrabbit's hind foot.

She tilted her head, looking up into his eyes. "How can a world so full a life not have somethin' makin' it so?" She paused a moment as if honestly waiting for an answer. Her dark eyes were like a pair of burning coals searing him. They drifted shut as she rose up on her toes. One of her hands hooked around his neck pulling him down to her. Lips as soft as flower petals brushed his.

He gasped quietly in surprise, then his mouth closed over hers, responding instinctively to her kiss. Her mouth was wet, warm and yielding. His lips fed on hers, light presses that slowly became hungrier, more aggressive. The handle of the pail slipped from his fingers. Dimly he heard it hit the ground, as his hands stole up to cup her face and hold it steady. He angled his head to settle his mouth more firmly over hers.

Grace leaned into him, wrapping her arms around his neck and clinging to him. Her breasts pressed against his chest, soft, malleable mounds of flesh that sent waves of desire sweeping through him. His cock responded to her proximity, rising erect and hard between them.

It was wrong. He had to stop it before they went too far.

Every cell in his body was alive and vibrating with need. Heat radiated from his body and hers, melding them together into one incandescent being.

It was perfect, right and natural. How could he end such bliss?

"No!" Letting go of her mouth with a gasp, he pushed her away from him. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"I did. I meant to." She gazed at him with eyes so dilated they appeared black, and shook her head. "Ain't nothing wrong with it. Just kissing. Didn't you like it?"

“Yes. Of course, but that’s not the point. I—I’m a minister. I’m supposed to be...” What he was supposed to be? He’d forgotten. “Giving spiritual guidance.”

“Don’t need it.” Slipping her hands around his waist, she moved in close again.

“I... We don’t even know each other. We just met. It’s not appropriate.”

“Why not?” She had to tilt her head back to look up into his eyes.

“You’re very young.” He gripped her shoulders intending to push her away once more and yet he kept holding them. “Too young. I’d be taking advantage of you.”

Her laughter tinkled like wind chimes on a breeze. “You’re young too. Maybe I’d be the one takin’ advantage. Think I’m an ignorant country girl, too dumb to know my own mind?”

“No.” His hands slid from her shoulders down to her wrists to remove her hands from his waist, but paused there. “But ‘just kissing’ can lead to other things. It’s immoral to indulge in bodily pleasures without the blessing of marriage.”

Grace made a scoffing sound and pulled him even tighter to her. “You tellin’ me you never messed around with a gal afore?”

Nathan’s face burned at her bluntness. “Not like this.” He thought of the times he’d walked Mary Albright home after Sunday school, holding her hand as they strolled down a quiet country lane. Only occasionally had he dared to kiss her in the shelter of the big oak tree; she’d only occasionally allowed it. But the walks always ended the same, with him escorting her safely to her parents’ front door and leaving her there with a polite kiss on the cheek under her mother’s watchful eye.

Looking up at him from under half-lidded eyes, Grace pressed her groin to his and twisted her hips slightly, rubbing up against him. “Never done this?”

His breath sucked in with a gasp, and although he was still holding her forearms, Nathan realized he wasn’t pulling her hands away from his body. In

fact his face was slowly inclining toward hers, his gaze riveted on her lips and the pink tip of her tongue darting out to lick them. As inevitable as the sun sinking into the western horizon his mouth was drawn back to hers. Misgivings and moral dilemmas still clattered around in his brain, but he was able to dull their noise and concentrate completely on her sweet lips yielding to his.

His mouth opened and closed against hers in little kisses. Nathan dared to let his tongue slip out to trace the shape of her lips. Grace's warm, wet tongue touched his and they explored each other tentatively at first then with growing urgency.

He slipped his arms around her, splaying his hands on her back and feeling her hot skin and the sharp points of her spine beneath the thin material of her dress. He moved his hands experimentally up and down the length of her back, stopping short of crossing the line from waist to buttocks.

Grace had no such compunction. Her hands roamed restlessly on his back, feeling him through his T-shirt, before settling below his waist. Nathan emitted a surprised grunt when she grasped his bottom and squeezed. She pulled her mouth from his and kissed his jaw and neck. "Too hot 'n' sticky here. Come on." She turned from him abruptly and taking his hand, led him along the path she'd made through the berry patch to the woods.

Chapter Three

With her eyes not holding him hostage and her lips not kissing his common sense away, Nathan's worries clamored to the surface. He should stop this now before it went any farther; tell the girl he must be on his way; extricate himself from this very dangerous situation before it was too late. But underneath the cool spread of tree branches, Grace looked up at him again and he was lost.

"I should... I have to..."

She lifted a hand and rested her fingers over his lips. "Shh. Tarry a while." She pulled him down to the ground with her. It was carpeted with long, feathery, dried pine needles that released a sharp tang as they were crushed beneath two bodies. Sitting close to Nathan, Grace pressed her palm to his, measuring her small hands against his larger ones. Then she linked her purple-stained fingers with his, clasping their hands together.

He watched her hand play, so innocent and charming, and relaxed a little. This wasn't harmful and it would hurt no one if he kissed her once or twice. Suiting action to thought, Nathan leaned to kiss her once more. This time he pushed his hand into her tangled hair. The silky strands slipped and caught between his fingers. Underneath the wild mass he cupped the back of her fragile skull.

Nathan breathed in her scent as he kissed her over and over. Her hair smelled of natural oils and her body, covered in a sheen of sweat, was musky and feminine. Her odor was ripe and rich as the earth, arousing him in a primal way that Mary Albright's fresh soap and floral perfume never had. As

the kisses deepened, his tongue delving into Grace's mouth and twisting sinuously with hers, Nathan groaned quietly.

His left hand released hers and moved to rest on her rib cage. He could feel the ladder of bones beneath his palm and climbed it until he reached a soft mound. His heart, already pounding, jolted, missed a beat then raced even faster as his hand encountered its first female breast. Mary had never allowed this familiarity. Nathan fondled the soft, resilient bulge, testing its shape and weight and experimenting with rolling the hard, pointed nipple between his fingers. The thin fabric of Grace's dress was no hindrance to his exploration. She may as well have been nude he could feel her so well.

Nathan released her lips and trailed his mouth to her soft cheek then down to her throat. Her pulse beat against his lips as he nuzzled there and tasted the salt-sweat of her skin. He moved his hand to her other breast, squeezing lightly and teasing the nipple to sharpness with practiced ease now. His mouth skated around the curve of her neck to lick the soft spot just beneath her ear.

Grace laughed and squirmed, pushing her ear to her shoulder to shut him out.

Nathan was delighted at her reaction and at the musical sound of her laughter. He dove in to catch her on the other side, kissing and nibbling her neck while she shrieked and pushed him away.

He sat for a moment, regarding her flushed face and smiling mouth. The girl had all the grace and beauty of a wild creature. He reached out and pushed a lock of her hair back from her eye, tucking it around the pink shell of her ear. The light moment between them darkened to weighty significance as their eyes met and held. A charge of primitive desire passed between them from blue eyes to brown.

Nathan leaned in to kiss her again, and this time it wasn't a tentative exploration, but deep and possessive. Grace kissed him back, hungry and needy. Soft little moans rose from her throat driving him to greater heights of

arousal. Her fingers clutched the material of his T-shirt over his chest, clinging like a burr.

His erection grew as their groping and kissing escalated. He shifted his body sideways until he could press into her hip, but the slight friction didn't satisfy him.

Grace pulled away from their passionate kissing, breathing hard, her eyes wide open and glazed. She bunched Nathan's shirt up in both hands and tugged it over his head, casting it aside and staring at his sweaty, heaving chest. She reached out and laid her palm flat on it then stroked her hand down the planes of his chest and abdomen. His stomach muscles twitched violently beneath her caressing touch.

Nathan groaned again. He should stop her now. He could no longer pretend this was an innocent flirtation in the woods. A line was being crossed into an ethical and moral quagmire from which he couldn't hope to emerge clean. Still he hesitated, breathing sharply in and out as Grace's hand dragged slowly up, down and around his naked torso. Nathan prayed to God for the strength to grab her wrist and pull her hand away, to tell her what they were doing was wrong and must end.

Suddenly Grace drew back, and he sent a silent thank you to the heavens for the answer to his prayer.

But she took hold of the hem of her dingy cotton shift and pulled it up over her head, revealing her slim, nude body. Dark tufts of hair shadowed her armpits and her arms rose long and white as lilies. Her breasts were drawn up by the stretch of her arms, the nipples erect and a deep rose color against her pale bosom. They pointed straight at Nathan.

Taking her head out of the neck hole of the dress, she shook her hair back and looked at him.

Nathan's throat constricted and his chest hurt like someone had punched it. He could do nothing but stare and stare at her beautiful naked body,

admiring all the curves and angles; her rounded shoulders and high, firm breasts, the delicate wings of her collarbones and the plane of her chest. Her stomach was flat and smooth and her waist nipped in then flared out at her hips in a pretty curve. Her sex was concealed by a pair of white underpants. Her legs sprawled across the pine needles as long and graceful as a young colt's.

His eyes focused on hers once more. "We mustn't do this," he murmured.

"Why not?" Her voice was a quiet whisper too. She cupped a hand underneath each breast and lifted them like an offering.

Nathan swallowed hard and searched his mind for the reason. He couldn't remember it. Leaning forward, he lowered his head to the level of her chest and kissed the soft skin at the top of her breast. His fingers replaced hers on the underside, caressing the delicate flesh. He kissed his way down the slope of her breast then slowly sucked the solid warmth of her nipple into his mouth. His tongue rolled over it and he suckled like a child.

Grace's hand slipped into his hair, holding his head to her. She moaned quietly and arched her chest into his mouth.

Nathan was surprised at her sounds of pleasure. He hadn't thought about women liking sexual things. Actually, he'd tried to keep his mind away from bodily matters entirely, focusing on higher, purer pursuits. But being a young man it was inevitable that in the dark of night in his solitary bed he would fantasize about sex, wondering what the act was really like and picturing female attributes; the curve of a calf, the glimpse of a pale inner arm, the bow of a full lip. He would stroke himself with his eyes squeezed tight shut, imagining what the bumps in the front of Mary Albright's dress might look like unclothed.

But this, the real thing, was so much stronger, headier, earthier than he could ever have imagined. He hadn't counted on the texture of flesh or the

smell of it. And he hadn't expected the soft whimpers of pleasure a woman would make that sent a man's blood raging through his veins.

Nathan gave his attention to her other breast, stroking and fondling it before drawing the nipple between his lips and laving it with his tongue. The salty flavor of her skin was mixed with something else he couldn't identify—an essence that was simply her.

One of her hands tangled in his hair, the other caressed his shoulder, feeling his muscle then stroking down the length of his back as far as she could reach. She shifted and lay back on the ground.

Nathan followed her, lying cradled between her thighs, his erection pressed into her sex through layers of fabric. He thrust his hips, rubbing his hardness against her. She moaned and wiggled beneath him. His cock must be touching a spot that felt good to her too. He lowered his head to kiss her mouth once more, trying to decide if her berry-flavored lips or her breasts were softer.

When he'd transferred his attentions to her breast again, he decided he couldn't make a choice. Both parts of her were equally soft and perfect—as was the dip of her waist, the drum-taut skin of her stomach, her slender neck and rounded cheek. There wasn't a single feature of her body that wasn't supple, feminine and utterly delectable.

After petting and loving her breasts for a while, he moved lower, kissing down the surface of her stomach between the ridges of her rib cage and fluttering his lips over her bellybutton. Her stomach leaped and twitched as he kissed her there. He stopped when he reached the waistband of her underwear, staring for a moment. Dare he go further? Tentatively he cupped his hand over the hard mound of her pubic bone through the cotton fabric.

Grace rose to his touch, lifting her hips off the ground. Encouraged, he slid his hand across the hard bump and down the soft cleft in between her legs. Her underwear was damp and it occurred to him that it wasn't sweat but some mysterious womanly fluid. He exhaled, excited by the idea, and suddenly he

desperately needed to feel that secret place between her legs without the barrier of fabric.

Nathan pressed another kiss to her stomach before stealing a glance at Grace's face.

Her eyes were closed and her chin lifted, her lips slightly parted.

He slipped his hand down inside her underwear to feel the wiry fluff of curls and slippery folds of her sex with his seeking fingers. Sliding them along her seam, he encountered the open entrance of her sex. Nathan didn't know what he'd expected to find between a woman's legs, but this was so different, so messy and real. It thrilled him. His cock swelled to its limit, vibrating and eager to be buried inside her hot depths.

Grace gasped at the intrusion of his fingers then let out another soft, whimpering moan that made Nathan want to answer with a growl.

He moved his fingers in and out of her where his throbbing cock wanted to be. The primitive need to possess her body rose in him in growing waves. It seemed fully possible he might tear her underpants off and impale her with his cock like a savage beast. He hadn't known he was capable of such violent urges.

The girl thrust up against his probing fingers. After a moment, she reached down and took hold of his hand, moving it farther up her slit, showing him where she wanted him. "Right there."

Beneath his finger, Nathan felt a small, hard nub. He tickled it lightly and the results were extravagant. Grace writhed and moaned. "More!" she gasped.

Nathan laid aside his own urgent need to concentrate on the fascinating phenomenon a simple rub with his finger could produce. In a few short moments Grace had moved from wiggling and moaning to bucking up against his circling finger. Her neck arched as her head fell back, and her body lifted off the piney mat like a bridge. She cried out, a guttural howl that sent another

rage of desire through him then her body dropped back down to earth and she lay still, breathing heavily.

Nathan had come from the friction of his own stroking hand enough times to understand what had just happened to Grace. But no one had ever told him women could experience release like a man did. In his life, talk of sex had been limited. He knew it was for procreation, but sometimes men struggled against base needs that women could never understand. Grace's orgasm was a revelation.

He watched her face, sweating and pink-cheeked, as she came down into herself. Ragged breaths panted from her parted lips. Strands of hair clung to her damp forehead and her eyelashes fluttered against her cheeks. Suddenly her eyes opened and she gazed right at him. A slow smile curved her mouth.

He was as pleased as if he'd received a precious gift. He returned her smile. Grace held her hand out toward him.

Although he knew it was too late to turn back, he asked, "Are you sure?"

She nodded and reached to pull her underpants down her hips.

Nathan rose and quickly took off his shoes, socks and pants while watching Grace shimmy her underwear off her legs. His focus was riveted on the dark triangle of hair at the apex of her thighs and the glimpse of woman parts between her legs. He drew a deep breath, bringing his racing heart back under control, and lowered himself on top of her. When he was cradled between her legs once more, there was no fabric trapping his penis and it nestled snugly between the slick folds of her labia.

He thrust against her, slow and easy for several strokes, just rubbing along her crevasse. Then he reached down between them and positioned his cock at her opening. He could barely breathe and his body quivered with tension as he pushed into her and was enveloped in her wetness. The heat and friction of his entry into her body was exquisite. Nathan closed his eyes, immersing himself in the sensation.

Grace gasped aloud as he sheathed himself completely in her depths.

His eyes opened and he gazed at her in concern. "Have I hurt you?"

"Mm." She shook her head, her lips pressed in a tight line. "Just a little. I ain't done this before."

"What?" His eyes widened and he stilled inside her. "What?" Her manner had been so relaxed and assured as she initiated their lovemaking that he'd never considered she could be a virgin.

"It's all right." She slid her hands down his back and gripped his ass, pulling him tighter to her. "I want to."

"But..." He was frozen, torn between the towering need still throbbing in his cock and the ethical dilemma of having sex outside of marriage *and* with a virgin. His conscience sent signals to his dick and it flagged slightly at the news.

"Don't stop. Go ahead," she urged, lifting her hips and tightening her inner muscles around him.

"But why?"

She looked up at him and her eyes were dark wells of sadness. "I need to. Please."

Nathan felt like the world had tilted. The heat and light of the summer day still surrounded them, but unexpected shadows moved in it now. What had been a simple fulfillment of lust took on an aspect of something deeper and darker. He didn't know what Grace's sorrow was, only that he had the power to alleviate it. The question of morality faded from his mind and he turned his attention to giving her what she wanted.

"All right. If you're sure," he said quietly.

She caressed his naked flanks, encouraging him to move within her again.

Nathan pulled slowly out and eased back in, concentrating on controlling the glide in and out of her tight channel. His knees and hands dug into the ground through the prickle of pine needles and twigs. Sweat rolled down his

back and face and gathered between their bodies. His stomach slid against hers, their flesh sticking together slightly from the sweat pooled between them. Nathan's jaw clenched as he forced himself to keep a steady, gentle pace when his body wanted to ram into her like an army assaulting a castle wall.

He leaned down to press a kiss to her cheek and whisper near her ear. "All right?"

"Yes." She lifted her hips to meet his thrusts and made a soft humming sound in her throat. Her hands slid up his sweat-slicked back to his shoulders and clung to him. She wrapped her legs around his hips, changing the angle of penetration, making it even deeper.

Nathan pumped into her faster as his arousal grew. The wet sounds their bodies made together and his harsh gasps and grunts floated through the still, humid air around them. Raw need like sensitive nerve endings in an open wound rampaged through him. He could no longer control his pace, but pressed into her slight body harder and deeper with each thrust. It felt wonderful, powerful and achingly painful as the separate strands of desire coiled together and twined into one strong throbbing chord of want.

Nathan's balls drew up tight and a shuddering began at the root of his cock. The sensation spilled through him to explode in a burst of pure euphoria as he pushed deep inside her and released. He felt himself rise from his body and float free for astounding moments before crashing back into the solidity of flesh. *God, I should be sorry, but I'm not.* The fleeting thought darted through his mind then disappeared again, leaving him full of nothing but ecstasy.

Chapter Four

She held him to her as the last tremors of delight quivered through him. He turned his face into the crook of her neck and kissed her, breathing her in so he would remember this moment always. “Thank you,” he murmured soundlessly.

Her hand rubbed his back, up and down in rhythmic strokes. “’Twas different than I expected,” she said after a moment.

He lifted his face to look at her with a frown. “But all right?”

She met his eyes and smiled. “Yes. All right.”

Nathan rolled off her body to lie beside her. Grace’s backside must be raw from being scraped across a carpet of pine needles. He watched his red, glistening prick, slowly diminishing from its aroused state, then gazed at the thatch of hair hiding Grace’s sex and the wonders it contained. Reaching out, he touched her, stroking his finger idly over the hard nub he’d discovered there.

She twitched and jerked away, squeezing her thighs together and laughing. Grabbing his wrist, she drew his hand up to hold it against her breast instead.

He studied her face, the large, dark eyes, pointed nose, firm little chin and bee-stung lips. “Was it really all right?” His question was about more than her physical well-being. Now that the burst of rapture had faded, thorny moral questions rose in his mind again. “How old *are* you?” Lying there so thin and delicate, she appeared only thirteen or so.

“Nineteen.” She regarded him with a twinkle in her eye. “Preacher, you worry too much. I done tole you it was all right. More’an that. It was good.”

He couldn’t stop questioning her. “Why? Why would you want to do this with a stranger?”

She shrugged. “The spirit moved me.” Her eyelids lowered until they were almost closed. “Besides, I think you was sent to me today. Like an angel.”

“What?” A chill went through him despite the heat. He was supposed to be a man of God, ministering to people’s spiritual and psychological needs. Had he just taken advantage of a poor girl with romantic sacred delusions?

“When you asked about my family, I didn’t tell you everything. My momma did used to read us from the Bible, but she died nigh on two years ago. My little sister, Shelly, got took by the same fever, and my older brother, Jake, lit off for the city shortly after. He couldn’t stand livin’ at the homeplace no more. So that left just Daddy an’ me.”

Nathan held his breath, listening to her quiet confession. His hand was still wrapped around her small, soft breast and he sheltered it in his palm, feeling her heartbeat.

Grace’s eyes closed, the long, dark lashes fanning her cheeks. She drew a choked breath. “Then a couple months ago Daddy died too. He went huntin’ and didn’t come back for a few days. I went lookin’ for him and found him at the bottom of a ravine. Edge musta crumbled away an’ he fell. I climbed down, but he ’as already gone.” Her jaw clenched tight. “Couldn’t take ’im up so I went and got a shovel and buried him right there.” She opened her glistening eyes and looked at Nathan. “You suspect that’s all right? I said a prayer.”

“Yes,” he assured her. “I’m sure God heard you. You did what you could. But why didn’t you go get one of your neighbors to help you?”

She frowned. “Nearest neighbor’s couple miles away and not too neighborly. Flies was already settin’ in and I had to get Daddy in the ground.”

Nathan pictured the girl struggling with the monumental task of digging a hole in the hard, stony mountain, and surrendering her father's corpse into the earth. Grace was a tough, resilient young woman. Her isolation and loneliness moved him. "So you haven't talked to anyone about this, and you've been living on your own ever since?"

"I get by. I got a garden. I fish and shoot game with Daddy's rifle."

"But what will you do in winter? You can't stay up on the mountain all alone. You should come down to the village. People will help you."

Slipping out from beneath his hand, she sat up and wrapped her arms around her knees. "I ain't used to people. Don't know as I'd get on too well."

Nathan frowned and sat up too. What was holding her here? She didn't seem shy to him. Perhaps she was simply afraid of change. He touched her stiff shoulder. "What made you think God sent me?"

Grace rested her cheek on her knee and looked at him. "I was feelin' exceptional lonesome today. Missin' my family and wantin' someone in a powerful way. I weren't prayin' exactly, but wantin' with all my might for someone to come along—and then there you was. 'Divine providence', my mamma woulda said."

Nathan stroked her hair then pulled his hand away. "You needed someone to talk to not... I should have just talked to you. What kind of spiritual counselor am I?"

"No." She lifted her head and turned toward him. "Not just talkin'. I wanted exactly what you give me. All of that." She took his hand in hers and gazed into his eyes, quoting in a low voice, "My beloved is all radiant and ruddy, distinguished among ten thousand. His head is the finest gold, his locks are wavy. His speech is most sweet and he is altogether desirable.' You know that? It's from the Bible."

“Yes. I know it.” Nathan had steered clear of the Song of Solomon since most of the verses tended to enflame a young man’s senses, but he recognized the opulent words of love.

Grace blushed and looked down at their joined hands. “Ain’t sayin’ you’re my beloved or nothin’. But what we did made me feel good like that—warm and alive again.”

Nathan enfolded her in his arms, pulling her across his lap and holding her close. “It was very special. And it was my first time too,” he admitted. Resting his chin on the top of her head, he brushed stray pine needles and grit from her hair and back. “I’m sorry about your family. Losing all of them like that is very hard. It’s difficult to see God’s hand in it.”

She nodded, her warm head moving against his neck. His arm fit snugly around her middle and she clasped it with both hands. “I don’t understand it, but there’s gotta be a reason for everythin’, don’t you think?”

“Yes.” He kissed her hair, and when she tilted her head back to look up at him, kissed her lips. “Yes. Guess I wouldn’t be in this line of work if I didn’t believe that.” He smiled.

Grace smiled back then wrapped her arms around his neck and held tight, nuzzling her mouth into the crook of his neck and shoulder.

He held her for a long while before she spoke again. “Feels awful nice like this, but kind of hot an’ sticky. Mayhap we should wash up at the stream.” She rose from his lap, and Nathan stood too. They walked through the trees as natural as Adam and Eve in the garden to kneel once more by the spot where the water welled up from the ground. It trickled along a narrow streambed that meandered off into the woods.

Grace immersed her face in the water and splashed it all over her chest and arms. She threw handfuls over her shoulders onto her back and washed between her legs. The sight of her, wet and dripping, stirred Nathan’s desire again. He looked away until she was finished then took his turn at the water.

When he was done bathing in the icy water, he sat back on his heels, refreshed.

Grace had her hands behind her head, plaiting her long hair into a braid. He watched with fascination her quick, efficient movements, the rise and fall of her breasts as her arms stretched behind her head, the lift of her rib cage and the way her mouth pursed a little as she concentrated on the task. She fastened her hair by twisting it around itself in some fashion then glanced at Nathan. "Shoulda had my hair up all day. It's too hot to have it stragglin' down."

"Looked pretty though." He reached out and touched the thick plait lying across her shoulder. "Looks pretty like that too."

Her smile lit up her eyes. Nathan's heart flipped inside him and he realized right then he might be in trouble. It would be too easy to move from lust to love with such a sweet, pretty girl, who'd given herself without hesitation, opening up a world of pleasure to him.

He stood, offering his hand to her this time. "Maybe we should go back to blackberry picking. See if we can fill those pails before the sun goes down."

Chapter Five

They walked back to where their clothes lay discarded underneath the pine trees and dressed. Nathan had sometimes wondered how married couples managed to interact so politely and casually in front of people when they did such intimate, private things together in bed at night. He had imagined it would be strange to be naked in front of his bride on their wedding night and to face her the next morning after having sex, but it wasn't strange at all with Grace. He didn't feel shy or awkward around her—and he barely knew her.

As they returned to the berry patch, she talked about some of the other families on the mountain; the hot-tempered Cadeys, the shiftless Lowes and the kindhearted but extremely luckless Stantons. While they picked, she told him stories about people in the community and the intricate relationships between the various families. Nathan felt he'd gleaned more information from listening to Grace than if he'd tramped all over the mountain. Of course, eventually he had to make contact with everyone, but this afternoon hadn't been completely squandered on selfish pursuits.

Grace questioned him about what it was like growing up in the north and he told her all about his boyhood in Michigan, his family, friends, school and life at the seminary.

"How about you?" he asked. "Did you attend school or learn at home?"

"My momma taught us our letters. The bible is the only book we got, but my daddy was a great storyteller. My brother, Jack, was too. I wish'd he'd come back."

“Where did he go?”

“Lexington. Leastways that’s where he and Hiram was headed.” She topped off her bucket with a final berry then set it aside. “Hiram was Jack’s friend and my beau for a while ’til they took off.”

“Oh.” That explained some things Nathan thought, how Grace seemed so comfortable with her body and his. She’d had a boyfriend and they fooled around some.

“He never understood me though. He was a real lunkhead.”

Nathan smiled, glad to hear it. “My girlfriend back home was named Mary,” he offered.

“She waitin’ for you there?” Grace pressed her hands against the small of her back and arched it, which thrust her breasts forward fetchingly.

“No. She married someone else from our high school class while I was off at college.” He shrugged. “Just as well. We really didn’t have much in common.”

She walked over to where he was picking and began helping him fill his pail. “Guess you have a lot of girls back in your hometown who’d be glad to hitch up with a preacher.”

He shrugged again. It was true. In the brief time he’d spent at home after graduation his mother had invited a half dozen unmarried young ladies to dinner to meet “my son, the minister”.

The shadows of the trees spread over the glade bringing relief from the unrelenting sun. The late afternoon slant of sunlight gave Nathan a melancholy feeling of time slipping away. His bucket was almost filled.

His hand brushed against Grace’s as both of them dropped berries into the pail at the same time. They looked up and their eyes met.

Nathan lowered his bucket to the ground then straightened and put his hands on her waist. He pulled her close and bent to kiss her. She tasted sweet as the berries she’d been eating. He savored her lips, flicking his tongue lightly

over them and probing into her mouth to meet her tongue. Her mouth was wet and warm as a summer's day.

He didn't mean for things to escalate. He knew their afternoon together was drawing to a close and only wanted to share a few kisses before they went their separate ways. But one kiss led to another, each deeper and more urgent.

Grace combed her fingers through his hair and held his head, drawing him down to her. Her mouth was open and seeking, kissing him with a passion and intensity that stole his breath. She released his head and moved her hands down to his stomach, pushing them up underneath his shirt.

Not again, he thought, feeling his resistance drain away beneath the assault of her stroking hands. *I shouldn't. She's vulnerable. I'm compromising her virtue. I'm a minister for God's sake.*

Too late. With a strangled groan, he ripped his shirt over his head and tossed it on top of a clump of blackberry canes, then grabbed Grace's shift and tugged.

She raised her arms so he could pull it off her. When he had thrown it aside, Nathan took hold of her wrists and ran his hands the entire length of her upraised arms down her sides to her waist. He loved the long line of her body and the way she shivered at his touch. Bringing his hands up to her breasts, he kneaded the round globes, toying with her nipples. He experimented with pulling lightly and twisting them. The way Grace thrust her chest into his hands and cried out softly let him know she liked it.

Nathan bent his head to draw one of the beaded nipples into his mouth.

"Wait," Grace said. She reached into the blackberry leaves behind her and brought her hand out with a juicy indigo berry.

In a flash, he knew what she was going to do and the knowledge sent a hot jolt of yearning to his already erect penis. It swelled harder, straining against his pants.

Grace held the blackberry just above her nipple and squeezed. Juice trickled from the mashed pulp onto the erect bud.

Nathan emitted a soft, animal growl deep in his throat. He leaned to lap up the dripping juice then sucked her sweetened nipple into his mouth. It tasted like pure nectar, like the very essence of this sultry August day. He rolled his tongue over the turgid flesh and sucked hard.

Grace moaned and pushed toward him, clasping his head to her breast.

When he had licked and sucked every last drop of the sticky juice from one breast, he turned his attention to the other. Once more Grace anointed her breast with berry juice, coating the tip with not only juice but the pulpy flesh of the fruit as well.

Enraptured with the exotic experience, Nathan dropped to his knees and lapped and suckled her juicy breast like a starving man. He splayed one hand on her back, holding her close, and fondled her breast with the other. He glanced up to see Grace looking down at him through half-closed eyes. Her lips were parted and her breathing heavy.

Nathan moved his mouth to just below her breast and kissed the hard bone of her rib cage. He licked, nibbled and kissed every inch of her abdomen right down to the edge of her underpants. Then he slid the drawers down her hips and off her legs.

He crouched before her, his eyes level with her sex. He hadn't been able to look at it too closely before, being much more intent on getting inside it, but now Nathan took the opportunity to examine the mystery of her womanhood, the "cradle of life" that drove men wild. Tentatively, he petted the tuft of hair covering her pubic mound. He rifled his fingers through it then separated the plump pink folds beneath to reveal the hard little nub he had played with earlier. It rose erect and red from a little hood of flesh. When he brushed the tip of his finger over it, Grace jerked. Her reaction made him smile.

Nathan delved his fingers farther down her slick, wet vulva and parted the folds of flesh with his thumbs. He looked at the reddened flesh surrounding her dark entrance.

Grace held absolutely still as he examined her down there.

Possessed by a primitive desire, he leaned in and licked lightly over the little button that brought her such delight. It tasted musky and slightly salty.

“Oh!” Grace’s hands slipped into his hair and held his head. Her hips thrust forward as he continued to lap over the sensitive nerve bundle.

Blindly, Nathan reached for the bucket of berries sitting on the ground nearby. He pulled away from Grace for a moment and she whined in frustration. Excited at his creativity and daring, he mashed one of the softened berries against the sharp, red bud. Juice trickled down, following the folds of her sex.

Nathan bent his head and lapped up the seam, sampling the mingled flavor of sweet fruit and womanly juices. With no shame or hesitation he gave himself over to feasting on Grace’s sex. She moaned and cried out, fisting her hands in his hair, as he continued to lick her labia then suck and nibble her clitoris.

With a loud cry she bucked against his mouth. He slipped his tongue down her slit to her entrance once more and realized from the fresh gush of fluid that she had come. With his mouth, he’d brought her to orgasm. Nathan had never imagined such a thing was possible. He held her hips firmly between his hands, keeping her from tumbling to the ground since her quivering legs could barely hold her upright.

Rising to his feet, he enfolded her in his arms. She leaned her head on his chest, panting and gasping. Her arms were around his back, clutching his shoulders from behind.

Nathan was ready to take her right there, standing in the middle of the briar patch, but the threat of thorns stopped him. “Come on,” he whispered, pulling her arms from around him and taking her hand.

Leading her back to the trees at the edge of the glade, he took off the rest of his clothes and backed her up to the widest tree trunk he could find. He lifted her with a hand under each buttock and moved in between her legs, pressing her against the tree. His cock found its own way to her slick entrance without his hand to guide it. With a grunt, Nathan pushed inside her hot channel.

Her legs wrapped around his waist holding him to her, fingers gripping his shoulders almost painfully. Luminous eyes gazed into his as he drove his cock into her again and again. Her full bottom lip caught between her teeth and she made little soft sounds.

Nathan was suddenly concerned that the rough bark of the tree was scraping her back. "Are you all right?"

She nodded. "Keep going. Harder."

The word "harder" came out low and rough. The raw need in her voice sent a wildfire of arousal blazing through him. Nathan shifted his feet farther apart, planting them more firmly on the uneven ground and did as she bid. His jaw clenched with the effort of pumping his hips and supporting her weight. Her body clenched around his dick as he pushed in and out. The friction was amazing, sending waves of pleasure coursing through his nervous system. It took only minutes for him to reach climax. Abruptly, like a string of firecrackers one leading to the next, his synapses fired and his orgasm exploded in a powerful burst.

Nathan drove into Grace's body with a wordless cry. His fingers dug into the soft globes of her bottom and he collapsed against her, his face pressed to her shoulder. *I will remember this always—this afternoon, this moment, this woman. When I'm old and shivering by my fireside in the dead of winter, I'll remember this scorching August day and making love to a beautiful woman beneath a tree.*

He blew out a shaky breath and drew in another. Lifting his head, he looked into Grace's eyes.

She smiled at him, a sweet, trembling, little smile.

He eased his cock out of her and lowered her to her feet, holding her until she got her balance. Turning her around, he ran his hand over her back, feeling the abrasions from the tree bark. "I'm sorry."

She glanced at him over her shoulder and smiled. "It don't hurt. Anyway, I liked it. 'Twas somethin' powerful."

Taking her by the shoulders and facing her toward him again, he kissed her then rested his forehead against hers. "This whole day was somethin' powerful."

"Guess it's over now though. Sun's gettin' low." Grace stepped away from him as he released her.

Nathan saw she was right. He was surprised as always by the sudden changes in the mountains. Right now the light had the golden, glowing quality of very late afternoon, but soon it would be gone. Once the sun set behind the mountains, the land quickly plunged into deep gray twilight then blackness. "We'd better get dressed."

Once more they located their scattered clothes and put them on. Nathan picked up both of the full buckets of berries and faced Grace. "Do you want me to see you home?"

"If you do, you won't make it back to the valley before dark."

Nathan understood an offer was being made. If he went with Grace, he would stay the night at her house. When he returned to the rectory in the morning, there would be questions about where he'd spent his night on the mountain. He could lie and say he'd gotten lost and had to sleep in the woods or he could tell the truth and set tongues wagging about the preacher and the Parkins girl.

Even if his stay with her was innocent, people would talk and the slowly developing respect of the congregation for a minister considered "too young" would be damaged.

Besides which, Nathan could feel the basic attraction between them rapidly blossoming into something deeper. He sensed the possibility of a relationship that would change the entire course of his life if he chose that path. Grace was nothing like the pretty, accomplished, acceptable, Christian girl he expected to marry. He couldn't get involved with someone like her—not for more than one summer afternoon.

Looking down at the berries, he offered the buckets to her. "I guess I'd better be getting back to the parsonage. Mrs. Crowder will have dinner ready."

She accepted the pails. "All right then." She looked past him down the mountain. "You can find your way home all right?"

Nathan gazed into the dark depths of her eyes. "Yes. Thank you... Thank you for everything. I'm sorry I couldn't see you home."

She nodded and gave him a wistful smile. "That's all right. I thank you for everything too. You lit up my day some." With that she turned and walked away from him into the woods.

Nathan stared after her for a moment. The leaves swayed at her passing then were still. It was as if she'd never been there. He flexed his hands by his sides and lifted one to examine a long, red scratch on the back of it. Sighing, he headed down the mountain toward the parsonage.

Chapter Six

That night Nathan lay in his rumpled bedcovers, clad only in his underwear, one hand splayed across his naked chest. The blackberry scratches on his hands and arms itched and the room was too hot and stuffy for sleep. He closed his eyes and commanded himself to sleep, but images from his day on the mountain played against the back of his eyelids like a moving picture.

He couldn't get Grace out of his mind. Not only their sexual encounters, but the things she'd said, the way she moved, everything about her. She was unlike any woman he'd ever met. She was a force of nature, basic and elemental, but with glimmers of quick wit and humor showing a keen mind despite her lack of formal education.

But when he tried to picture her anyplace besides the mountain, he couldn't imagine it. He couldn't see her, for example, sitting in a front pew at church wearing a Sunday hat. The idea of her socializing with the church ladies or singing in the choir seemed ludicrous. He absolutely couldn't place her at his family's table for Christmas dinner, eating off his mother's best china and making polite conversation with his parents.

He could, however, imagine her sharing his bed at night. He could imagine that all too well.

With a frustrated groan, he climbed out of bed and went to the window. A three-quarter moon shone in the dark night. It reflected off the roofs of houses and the tops of trees so they shimmered all the way up the mountain. He could

see the ridge where he'd met Grace. She was up there somewhere, tucked away in her bed in a little mountain shack, alone, as he was alone.

Nathan cursed himself. He'd been so caught up in the idea of whether or not he should go with Grace that he'd completely overlooked his pastoral duty. Knowing about her father's death, he should have continued to encourage her to come down from the mountain and find a place in the town. The harsh mountain life was no good for a woman alone. Whatever his feelings for her, whatever they'd done, it was his responsibility to make sure the girl was cared for and brought into the communal fold. Tomorrow he would go back, find her and fulfill that obligation.

But when Nathan woke the next day, other duties claimed his attention. There was a baby born early whose fragile life hung in the balance. He went to pray with the young parents for a while in the morning. Then there was a ladies' guild luncheon he'd promised to attend. Following that he consulted with the curate about an infestation of carpenter ants in the church building. It was midafternoon by then and Nathan had not prepared his Sunday sermon.

Grace was still in his mind as she had been all day, teasing around at the edges of his consciousness, so he wrote his sermon on the topic of "grace". His thoughts were unruly and the writing went slow, and soon it was too late in the day to trek up the mountain.

As he stood by his bedroom window that night and looked at the black silhouette of the ridge against the midnight blue sky, he swore he would go the next day right after church.

Nathan's sermon that Sunday morning was lackluster at best. He stumbled over his words and had trouble delivering them with conviction. He felt like a sham in his black clerical garb, facing a roomful of people who'd experienced much more of the joys and suffering of life than he had. Who was he to tell them anything? God's grace, blessing and soothing their way, sounded beautiful in theory, but how did the words really help someone who'd lost a

loved one or was suffering an illness. Suddenly, everything about his speech seemed impractical and useless.

Nathan closed his eyes and drew a breath before speaking to his congregation again. "I believe in God's grace, but I know sometimes it's hard to feel it when things are very bad in your life. I believe that grace may come to a person in a much more concrete form than they expect; maybe a neighbor's helpfulness, a kind word spoken by a friend or a loving gesture from a stranger. I think that is how God shows his grace in a very direct way that human beings can understand."

He looked around the church at the many pairs of eyes—all watching him for a change. After trying to think of something else to add, he ended his sermon simply. "That's what I believe."

As Nathan greeted the parishioners exiting the church building, Mrs. Grassle reminded him that he was invited to her family's home for Sunday dinner. She presented her daughter, Mae Ann, whom Nathan had already met several times. "You remember Mae Ann, Reverend? She makes a wonderful peach cobbler which we'll be having for dessert."

He shook the girl's hand. "I'm looking forward to it." He glanced up at the mountain looming over the valley church. After dinner with the Grassles, he would go.

When the last of the congregation had left the building, Nathan walked back to the manse to take off the choking clerical collar for a while and unwind before he had to socialize with the Grassles.

The moment he entered the front door he smelled it, sweet, rich and palpable as though he was tasting instead of smelling it. Hot blackberries.

On the dining room table sat a pie, the crust a pale brown and neatly fluted around the edges. He leaned down and breathed in the luscious aroma then rested his hand on the surface of the pie. It was still warm.

“Mrs. Crowder,” he called, but there was no answer. It was her day off and he hadn’t really expected her to be in the house. He knew she hadn’t baked the pie. He knew where it came from.

A square of paper protruded from beneath the pie tin. He reached down and pulled out a note written in carefully printed letters on a square of cardboard cut from a soap flake box. “One day, like a crown of jewels, I will wear throughout my life. Better is one day than a lifetime of sorrowed nights.”

His chest ached. He swallowed and read the words of the psalm again...and again. Breathing in the scent of warm blackberries, he flashed on every moment of the afternoon he’d spent with Grace, recalling the texture of her skin and hair, the smoothness and perfection of her breasts and body, and the smell and taste of her sex. He could hear her voice, rising and falling like bird song and her laughter bubbling like the stream of water in the forest. But mostly he thought of her eyes—the glint of mischief in them and the sorrow in their dark depths.

Nathan set the note down on the table and touched the pie again. Still warm. And she had left it while he was at church so she couldn’t be far, maybe only halfway up the mountain. He could catch her if he hurried.

Spinning away from the table, he ran out the door into the bright sunlight. A pair of young boys were walking across the churchyard and he beckoned them over. “Please do me a favor. Stop by the Grassle’s house and tell them I won’t be able to make Sunday dinner. An emergency has come up.”

“Yes, sir.” Looking relieved as if they’d expected to be scolded for something, the two boys trotted off.

Nathan turned and walked briskly toward the road leading up the mountain. When he was out of sight of the church, he broke into a trot and after several paces a flat-out run. He raced up the slope, a line from the Song of Solomon reverberating with his thudding footsteps, “I am my beloved’s and her

desire is for me. Come, my beloved, and let us go forth into the fields. There I will give you my love.”

He ran until he had a stitch in his side and his heart pounded painfully. Turning off on a dirt track, he skidded on a loose stone and almost fell to his knees, then he was off and running again, racing upward toward his beloved.

He rounded a bend in the path and saw a slight figure in the shadows of the trees ahead. For the blink of an eye he saw it as a wild creature, a doe which had wandered out of the woods. His eyes focused and he beheld the figure as a graceful female form walking along the road. “Grace!”

She stopped and turned. Even from a distance he could see her eyes sparkle and light up on seeing him.

“Wait!” He ran toward her. “Wait for me.”

She ran to meet him and slammed into his arms with a force that nearly knocked him off his feet, throwing her arms around him.

He held her slim body tight and buried his face in her hair, breathing her in. She smelled like woman and sweat, and around her like a precious perfume floated the lingering, sweet aroma of blackberry pie.

About the Author

Whether you're a fan of contemporary, paranormal or historical romance, you'll find something to enjoy among my books. My style is down to earth and my characters will feel like well-known friends by the time you've finished reading. If you're used to a strong alpha male in romances, don't expect it here. While my heroes are manly, they're not aggressively macho. I'm interested in flawed, often damaged, people who find the fulfillment they seek in one another. I live a quiet life with my family completely the opposite of my characters' adventures.

To learn more about Bonnie Dee, please visit <http://bonniedee.com>. Send an email to Bonnie Dee at bondav40@yahoo.com or join her Yahoo! group newsletter at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Bonniedee>

Look for these titles by Bonnie Dee

Now Available:

Finding Home

Evolving Man

Blackberry Pie

Coming Soon:

Opposites Attract

Perfecting Amanda

Her family, her friends and her conscience all say it's wrong to fall for the hustler she rescued from the streets. How come it feels so right?

Finding Home

© 2006 Bonnie Dee and Lauren Baker

Available now at Samhain Publishing

Her family, her friends and her conscience all say it's wrong to fall for the hustler she rescued from the streets. How come it feels so right?

When Megan first meets Mouth, a homeless teenage hustler, on the streets of L.A., he's the perfect subject for the street life expose she hopes will help her break into journalism. She doesn't expect to be drawn into his life and become his friend—or to take him in after he's been beaten and robbed by thugs.

As they learn to live together, a powerful attraction flourishes between Megan and the young man. Although he's street smart, tough and mature, he's also a youth in transition. When they finally give in to the sexual heat between them, Megan fears she's taking advantage of her position as his mentor.

Their relationship challenges every aspect of her life. Megan must make difficult choices between the conflicting demands of her friends and family, her career and love.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Finding Home*:

They were the first to arrive. Stevie greeted them at the door, hugging Megan and shaking Sean's hand before taking the wine from Megan.

Megan watched him closely. Stevie was the only one of the friends present today who hadn't met Sean before finding out about their relationship. He was also thoughtful, rational, a good judge of character, and his opinion would influence the others. So she was a little apprehensive about his reaction.

"What can I get you guys, some beer? A glass of wine? Anything else?"

“You should try Stevie’s beer. He’s got this real microbrew fetish and always has something new to try out,” Megan told Sean. “But beware of the spiel he’ll try to feed you about the best brewing methods.”

Sean looked at her, the ghost of a smile flitting across his face. “Hey, I’m a guy. I can handle beer talk,” he said, mock-serious. The tension eased in her stomach. This was working. The boys could be cool with each other.

“I’ll go see how Sasha’s doing, then. And Stevie? I’d love a white wine, please. How come James isn’t here yet? He never turns down an occasion to raid your beer cellar before eating.”

As it turned out, Megan discovered in the kitchen that James and his waitress had just called to warn they’d be late due to car trouble. Allegedly, because as Sasha told her while they took out the pumpkin pie and put it on a plate, he’d sounded very out of breath on the phone. She was prepared to bet whatever had been slowing them down wasn’t engine-related.

“You think he called you in mid-fuck?” Megan asked, chuckling.

“I think he was in the car, actually. And I think Ms. Waitress is a pretty limber girl who might just have been giving him a blowjob at that point.”

Megan laughed. “Well, at least he’s bound to be in a good mood when they arrive.”

She was right. When James walked in ten minutes later towing a very pretty, young and remarkably well-endowed blonde behind him, he was in exuberant spirits. “Hey, everybody, meet Kerry!” He kissed Megan and Sasha, hugged Stevie, and nodded briefly at Sean, his expression neutral.

Kerry hugged everyone all around, and kissed Stevie and Sean enthusiastically to their obvious delight.

Megan bit her tongue when she saw Sean’s eyes drawn to Kerry’s chest for at least ten seconds before he snapped them back up. He caught her looking at him and made a sheepish face.

While everyone milled around the living room, pouring drinks and exchanging greetings, Sean pressed close to Megan and whispered in her hair, “Totally fake. I’ll take yours anytime.” His hand brushed against her ass in a lascivious caress that sent messages of lust through her body.

They sat down to eat shortly after. Sasha’s spread was opulent enough to satisfy the most exacting of standards. Megan thought even her mom would have been impressed. She certainly was. The turkey was impressive, and the table was crammed with mounds of mashed potatoes, candied yams, cornbread, several salads, cranberry sauce and pickles.

Sean pulled up a chair directly across from Megan. James’s bimbo sat next to him, flashing him a grin that slightly annoyed Megan. Less so when she felt Sean’s foot slyly rubbing her ankle in a gesture designed to evoke both reassurance and desire.

Conversation flowed around the dinner table, fuelled by alcohol, food, and longstanding friendship. Megan noted with pleasure that Sean sometimes joined in, in his reserved way, and his dry humor struck a chord with her friends. She was especially pleased to see Stevie engage him a couple of times and nod approvingly at her when he caught her watching them. James was less friendly, scowling at Sean occasionally, but managed to hold back from making rude comments.

Kerry was the classic ditzy L.A. blonde, complete with aspirations to make it in the movies and a brain roughly as small as her cup size was large. The guys, of course, cut her plenty of slack. But Megan caught James’s eye during a particularly inane tirade about cosmetic surgery and he looked embarrassed. She might have teased Kerry a little if Sean’s sock-clad foot hadn’t been insistently stroking her inner thigh in the most distracting manner.

“You can’t be serious!” Sasha’s voice rose with indignation. “You think it’s right that teenagers should get breast implants? You don’t think that’s maybe a little premature?”

Sean's foot slid farther up Megan's thigh, inhibiting higher brain functions and preventing her from joining in the debate without her voice betraying her. She looked across at him.

His face was impassive, head tilted slightly to the side, as though listening to the conversation, but Megan knew he was completely focused on her right now. His eyes were the only clue to what was happening under the table, the blue edged out by his dilated pupils.

"Well, you know, Sasha, I had these done when I was nineteen. You can't see the scars. I'll show you in the bathroom if you want. The surgeon who did them was a real pro. My dad paid for them. He said nothing was too good for his princess. And I haven't regretted it yet," Kerry said proudly.

There was a pause as her words sank in. James cringed and poked at his mashed potatoes.

Megan tuned out of the conversation then as Sean's toe reached her underwear and started pressing against her crotch. She focused all her concentration on keeping her breathing even and not making any noise. She wouldn't be able to keep it going for long. He pushed against her clit, harder, and she had to bite back a moan. Kerry might be monopolizing the attention right now, but if Megan had an orgasm at the table, she was pretty sure she'd steal the show.

Sean stared at her, lips slightly parted, and when their eyes locked, he smiled crookedly.

Megan kept her gaze on him as she slowly pushed back her chair to give him a chance to pull his foot away unobtrusively. The loss of contact made her want to cry out, but she couldn't handle the torture anymore. She stood and said in a surprisingly steady voice, "Anyone for coffee?"

In the kitchen, she filled the coffee machine with water and measured out the coffee. A couple of minutes later, Sean appeared in the doorway carrying stacks of plates. He put them on the counter and moved in on her, one arm

snaking around her waist, his other hand to the back of her neck. He pulled her in close for a kiss, his mouth hungry on hers and his cock pressing into her crotch. Megan brought her hands up to either side of his face, winding her fingers into his shaggy hair. She moaned softly into his mouth as their tongues entwined, hoping the sound wouldn't carry to the main room.

They kissed urgently for a couple minutes and only pulled apart when Stevie called out to Sean, "Hey man, want to watch some football while the chicks make the coffee and clear the table? Ow! Jesus, Sash, can't you take a joke?"

"You into the football?" Megan whispered.

"Not at the moment." Sean's hand slipped down to her hip and slid under her skirt. His fingers crept up her thigh, following the trail led by his foot earlier.

Megan's every pore reacted to him. She was close to letting him fuck her in the kitchen, not caring who walked in.

"Right now I want to fuck you." His husky voice sent shivers through her body. Her nipples stood erect, pressing against the fabric of her shirt.

Sean's other hand flicked across her chest, sending fire from her sensitive tits straight down to her sex.

She caught her breath. "Go check out the game and meet me in the back bathroom in ten minutes. Through the main bedroom on the left. I'll get the coffee done and after that, I don't give a damn."

He grinned. "Good thing I came prepared, huh?"

Ten minutes later, the coffee was on the table and Megan was in the master bath, hoping neither of their hosts would feel the need to use it in the near future.

She stood in front of the sink, looking at herself in the mirror. Her face was flushed, her eyes dark and bright, and she felt wired and intensely alive. This

was crazy. Any of her close friends could walk in on them, but she didn't care, as long as Sean showed up.

Past, present or future, a man is a man. The beast never changes.

Evolving Man

© 2007 Bonnie Dee

Available now at Samhain Publishing

You think men have changed over the centuries? Forget about it! Scratch the surface of any twenty-first century male and you'll find a cock-wielding caveman underneath.

In this time travel comedy, three roommates discover the truth about men as each becomes involved with a special lover. The friends also learn a little about themselves. Skeptic Chrissy sets her logic aside and allows her libido to run free with a primitive barbarian named Gareth. Scientist Lila experiences the testosterone hidden in her geeky cyber-buddy, Zach. Free-spirited Taylor brings sexuality and fun into the life of John, a repressed businessman from the future.

As they unravel the tangled knot transporting people through time creates, the women all come to realize a man is a man. The beast never changes.

Enjoy the following excerpt for *Evolving Man*:

"I've taken it a step further than simply viewing moments in time. Not only can my machine show images in time, but it can literally 'capture' a frame and materialize a figure contained in it in the flesh. Right here in this booth."

"Oh, I get it. Like in *Star Trek*. 'Beam me up, Scottie'." Taylor laughed. "It's amazing, Lila."

"Yes, just like *Star Trek*." Lila's voice dripped sarcasm.

On the screen, the marauding Vikings anchored ship and rowed small skiffs toward land. Lila fast-forwarded with a click of the mouse, making the

boats race across the water. She slowed the scene again, and the men climbed out of the boats to splash through the shallows toward the beach.

The sailors were tall and muscular, dressed in hide shirts and leggings, their faces almost hidden behind full beards and moustaches. Long, blond hair flowed from beneath their helmets. The Norse warriors brandished swords, pikes and other assorted pointy things as they charged onto the pebbled shore.

Waiting to meet the assault was a much smaller group of men, dressed in fur and leather hides. Remembering a little history, Chrissy guessed they were northern European or Briton villagers facing the marauders. The obvious leader of the defending army was taller and bulkier than his men. His shoulders and chest strained his deer-hide jerkin. Black hair was caught back in a leather thong at the nape of his neck. White teeth flashed against tan skin as he shouted encouragement to the other men, most of whom seemed on the verge of breaking and running before the attacking Vikings. The leader held his sword high and urged his men forward.

Although the moving picture was silent, Chrissy could imagine the man's cries to defend the village and the women and children. She felt sorry for the young leader, in charge of a timid group of fishermen with lame-looking weapons, facing a pack of huge, fierce Norsemen.

The two sides clashed. The fishing folk were definitely outmatched by the invaders. Chrissy cringed as limbs flew and blood spurted.

"Nasty," Taylor murmured. "But, man, that guy's kind of hot." She pointed to one of the Norsemen with flowing gold locks and bared teeth.

Lila frowned and froze the scene. "Typical, Taylor, I'm talking about assembling a think tank to solve the world's problems and you're ogling the men."

"No harm in looking." She shrugged, tossing back her curly, blonde hair.

Chrissy stared at the frozen image of the battle. It was crystal clear down to the details of sunlight glinting off the sharp edges of weapons and blood welling

from an open wound. Despite her disbelief, she was intrigued at the prospect of a time-traveling think tank. “How would you communicate with them? Da Vinci didn’t speak English, and I’m sure if you talked to one of these guys,” she nodded at the screen, “you’d get some incomprehensible dead language.”

“Ah.” Lila went to her work table and came back with an ear-piece much like a hearing aid. “I’ve also invented this translating device. It works by reading thought patterns and deciphering them into words the listener understands, rather than translating one language into another. Cool, huh?” Lila beamed, pleased with her own cleverness.

Chrissy stared, feeling terribly guilty she hadn’t even noticed her friend was cracking up. Lila spent days holed up here alone on the third floor of the house in her attic workshop. Her friends had always thought of her as an innovative genius with her many, ongoing experiments and inventions, but clearly her train had derailed.

Chrissy looked from her insane friend’s exultant face to the frozen picture on the screen. The Viking leader and the head defender of the soil were engaged in combat, swords poised ready to thrust. Their mouths were open, shouting. Blood and sweat streaked their bearded faces. The charge of testosterone in the air was almost palpable, and she was embarrassed to feel her crotch tighten simply from staring at the image of the two primitive warriors.

“Well, it’s an amazing idea. I can see you’ve worked hard on it.”

“So, exactly how would you do it?” Taylor traced a finger over the Viking seaman’s bulging biceps. “I mean, actually pick one and bring him to life?”

“It’s like computer animation,” Lila explained. “You choose the figure you want to work with, then, instead of manipulating the image as you would in movie making, you press this button and bring him to this moment in time. Your *Star Trek* analogy actually isn’t that far off the mark. Basically we’re deconstructing molecules and reassembling them here.”

“Very cool.” Taylor nodded as if it made perfect sense.

Lila did a point and click thing with her mouse and soon the dark-haired barbarian was outlined in red. “See? I’ve ‘cut him out of the picture’, so to speak. He’s the target now.”

Chrissy decided it was time to break the spell. The only way she was going to reach Lila’s addled brain was to demonstrate that the machine didn’t work. “Then you’d press *this* button?” She reached out and pushed a black button on the left side of the control panel.

“No! Chrissy, don’t!” Lila yelled, grabbing at her wrist.

There was a high-pitched, whining sound and the air shimmered then became as opaque as a dark cloud. Chrissy actually felt a change in the density of space around them, a thickening that made the air almost palpable. Suddenly an extra body crowded into the booth with the three women. Chrissy was pressed up against solid muscle, hot, sweaty skin and rank, half-cured animal hides.

The big, bearded man was still roaring his battle cry. Momentum brought his arm down with a mighty slice of his sword, right past Taylor’s face. The sword cleaved the monitor screen in two, sending jagged glass shards and electric sparks flying.

All of the women screamed and scrambled to get away. The barbarian bellowed and drew his sword out of the wreckage of the monitor.

As she stumbled from the booth, fighting to keep her balance and run away at the same time, Chrissy caught a glimpse of the man’s eyes.

They were wide and confused and they zeroed in on her. He lunged and grabbed her wrist, holding her fast in his powerful grip while yelling something in a language that sounded like pebbles being ground in a cement mixer.

Chrissy screamed at the top of her lungs, a piercing, fire engine wail.

The man dropped her wrist immediately.

She fled across the room.

The barbarian raised his sword, knocking the control panel and sending it crashing onto the floor. He backed out of the booth, holding the sword up in front of him and turning in a slow circle, assessing the room around him.

Shrieking, Taylor ran out the door and clattered down the stairs.

Lila froze near the open door, holding her hands up in a surrendering posture.

Chrissy sidled over to stand shoulder to shoulder with her. It was imperative they didn't let this guy out of the room. She pictured the barbarian hacking his way through the city, maiming pedestrians and stabbing shopkeepers, probably getting run over by a car or shot by the police. They must contain and calm him then send him back where he came from.

This summer, it's going to be Steamy...

Samhain Publishing Presents
Midsummer Night's Steam
24 Sizzling ebooks
\$2.50 each

*Duty wars with affection when Racor's greatest spy must decide who to trust,
the evidence against her sexy suspects, or her heart?*

A Scorching Seduction

© 2007 Marie Harte

Lt. Col. Trace N'Tre and Assassin Vaan C'Vail are hiding out in the only place the military can't touch them—on a pleasure planet in an island resort owned by Vaan's cousin. Gathering evidence on the outside, they know it's only a matter of time before they'll have to face their accuser, a high official in the Racor government.

Unbeknownst to them, Myst, Racor's greatest spy, has had her eyes on them for some time. The puzzle of these two alleged traitors doesn't fit, and Myst has made it her mission to find out why. But when the tables are turned and she's caught spying under the planet's hot summer suns, pleasure and affection confuse the issue, making her wonder who to trust—her heart, or the evidence against her lovers.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, frank language, ménage, m/m action, and hot sweaty adventure.

*Can a straight-laced business student and an indie boy with a thing for
extremely personal electronics turn one night's wild ride into a trip to last
forever?*

Catching a Buzz

© 2007 Ally Blue

Adam Holderman isn't your typical twenty-something college boy. He prefers jazz to Goth, shuns body piercings and street-waif clothing, and

despises the lack of vocabulary among his peers. Some call him uptight, but Adam doesn't see it that way. Just because he prefers his men articulate and well-groomed doesn't make him a stick-in-the-mud. He simply has standards, unlike most guys his age.

The new employee at Wild Waters Park, where Adam works, single-handedly throws a monkey wrench into Adam's orderly world view. Buzz Stiles wears eyeliner and black clothes, listens to emo bands, and talks like a teenage skate punk. He's the polar opposite of Adam's avowed "type". So why can't Adam get him out of his head?

When Adam finally agrees to go out with Buzz, he finds there's much more to Buzz than a hot body, a sharp wit, and a Goth fashion sense. Buzz is someone Adam can see himself being with for the long haul. But you need more than mind-melting sex to make a relationship last. Can they keep their hands off each other long enough to find out if they have what it takes?

Warning, this title contains the following: graphic language, explicit male/male sex, inappropriate use of personal electronic devices, and gratuitous disco dancing.

Her boyfriend is back...and that's a major problem. Antonia isn't ready to face the one man who shakes up her world...

Full Disclosure

© 2007 Mary Wine

Antonia doesn't need to look at forbidden fruit. The taste still clings to her lips, haunting her with just how good she and Danton had been together...

...Right up until he informed her that he had to get married because he was going to be a father. That just made it worse. Inside him was a man worth dreaming about, even if she knew it was in vain.

Danton always double-checked his facts. It was a habit that kept him alive during missions that should have killed him. His impromptu wedding was no exception. There wasn't going to be any consummation of the vows until he had a paternity test. But doing the right thing had cost him the one woman he loved.

Until the test came back negative. Now there is nothing that will stop him from coming back with the prize he'd been forced to abandon three months ago. Toni was going to be his, right after she got the full disclosure on his hasty wedding and the blunt fact that he loved her.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language and bondage bedroom games with toys.

Does a full moon really cause naughty behavior?

Bad Moon Rising

© 2007 Leeanne Kenedy

Hailey Burke has heard that full moons cause people to behave in strange ways, but she never thought it would apply to her until the night she winds up in bed with a man she doesn't even like. So she'd had a temporary loss of sanity when she slept with Zack Creighton, the womanizing photographer. Big deal. Doesn't mean she's going to do it again, right?

Wrong.

Unfortunately, Zack has something else in store for Hailey. He's liked the sassy redhead from the moment he met her, but he can't get the stubborn woman to let go of the misconceptions she's formed about him. Sure, he's played the field, but Zack is no womanizer, and he has no intention of leaving things at one night. Once he's had a taste of Hailey, he wants another. And he's determined to convince her that he's not the bad boy she's always thought.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language.

How can masturbating in a hotel Jacuzzi lead to love? Cassidy Yates is about to find out.

Beyond the Tears

© 2007 Michelle Cary

A year after her husband died while serving in Iraq, Cassidy Yates still nurses a broken heart. Thinking a vacation will help, she agrees to a week in Key West with her best friend, April. Upon arrival, April suggests a way for Cassidy to ease her pain—sleep with the sexiest stud she can find.

Not the type to bed hop, Cassidy refuses April's idea and ends up alone. Abandoned by her friend, Cassidy decides to take a nighttime swim. In the Jacuzzi, she masturbates to the memories of making love to her husband. Mortified by her own behavior, Cassidy retreats to her hotel room, hoping no one witnessed her exhibition.

Chase Dempsey is a man with rugged good looks and a killer smile. He isn't looking to fall in love and only wants few days of relaxation before returning to his Texas ranch. Still, he's curious after watching Cassidy's erotic display and wonders what makes the gorgeous redhead tick. When he finds her dropped sarong, he realizes she's just given him the opportunity to find out...

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex and graphic language.

Is their passion real, or only a mirage?

La Mirage

© 2007 Jennifer Colgan

On a lonely stretch of I-95 in the middle of the Nevada desert, journalist Savanna Blaine and photographer Ben Lantano find themselves stranded by engine trouble on their way back from an assignment. Their quest for a gas station leads them to La Mirage, a beautiful resort nestled in a secluded canyon where they are the only guests.

Invited to spend the night in lush accommodations, passion flares between Savanna and Ben who have suppressed their hidden desires long enough. A single touch ignites an unforgettable night in each other's arms, but the next day, when La Mirage mysteriously disappears, they're left to wonder, is their newfound intimacy real or nothing more than a trick of the summer heat?

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, oral sex.

One tempting heiress. Two sexy cowboys. Three means fun beyond her wildest dreams—until her Cord starts to unravel.

Take Me

© 2007 Mackenzie McKade

Thoroughbred rancher's daughter Caitlyn Culver has always wanted playboy Cord Daily, even after her daddy threatened to bankrupt him. But winning a racehorse in a poker game means Cord is no longer just a cattle rancher. He's come back wealthier and more wicked than ever.

Snaring this cowboy won't be easy for Cait, and keeping him will be even harder. Still, his sexual antics and taste for *ménages* won't scare her off. She knows the best way to snag a man like Cord is to pretend indifference. So when he comes onto her in the barn, she plays along—only to leave him tied to a ladder, aroused and unfulfilled.

It's payback time.

Cord seeks out Cait and brings along his playboy cousin, Dolan Crane. The two cowboys are enough to set her body afire. She's bound and determined to resist their sexual allure, but ends up experiencing a night beyond her wildest fantasies. Now Dolan wants Cait for himself. Cait's father wants Cord's racehorse. And Cord wants Caitlyn to choose—her father's money or her cowboy's love.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language, *ménage a trois*, and BDSM.

Can a jaded lawyer and a reformed criminal really find true love in the tropics?

Fijian Fling

© 2007 Sami Lee

Dumped by her boyfriend and on thin ice in her law career, Sophie Edison badly needs to re-evaluate her life. She escapes to her favorite hideaway on the tropical island of Fiji, where the attentions of the resort owner – the enigmatic

and lethally sexy Dominick 'Nick' Dufour – prove a temptation too great to resist. Nick's obvious desire to take her to bed is just the salve her battered confidence needs, and she embarks on an affair that leads her to uncharted waters. Before long she starts to wonder if she can ever go back to her old life.

Nick has lusted after Sophie for years. When she turns up at his secluded resort alone for the first time he wastes no time in making her his lover. Sophie is his perfect match in bed, and in the ocean and the shower...but although he might long for something more, Nick knows theirs is just a holiday fling. For he is keeping the secret of his checkered past from Sophie and it could prove the ultimate deal breaker...

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language.

Newlywed Catalina Robinson thinks it's not possible to be more satisfied...but then she learns what it's like to love two men.

Honeymoon Castaways

© 2007 Dawn Halliday

Cat has just married Dave Robinson, the man of her dreams. Their Best Man, Andreas Bailey, is flying them to their honeymoon resort in Barbados. But over the middle of the ocean, something goes horribly wrong...

Cat, Dave and Andreas find themselves stranded on an uninhabited Caribbean island. Though she's never thought of him as more than a friend, Cat finds herself connecting to Andreas in a way she never expected and is shocked and aroused to learn that her husband feels the same way. Together, the three of them discover a heat and passion uninhibited by the conventions of society. But will they ever be rescued? And what will happen to their unusual relationship once they return home?

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language, ménage a trois, voyeurism and skinny dipping.

Two men and a bottle of nut cream...

Nut Cream

© 2007 Jade Buchanan

Nut [nuht] noun, verb.

1. A dry fruit consisting of an edible kernel or meat enclosed in a woody or leathery shell.

2. Slang, Vulgar – a testis.

Cream [kreem] noun.

1. A soft solid or thick liquid containing medicaments or other specific ingredients, applied externally for a therapeutic, or cosmetic purpose.

2. Slang, Vulgar – to have an orgasm.

Toby Madison is coming into his mating phase, and is leaking pheromones all over the place. He is about to find out what happens to bad little wolves, in the best possible way. Cliff Bullen is more than ready to place his mark on the man he has always wanted as his mate – with a little help from a bottle of nut cream.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit male/male sex and graphic language.

Welcome to Fantasm Island! Leave your inhibitions at the door and let your fantasies soar.

Fantasmagorical

© 2007 Annmarie McKenna

That's what the brochure said anyway. A week long fling with a stranger. Where's the harm in that? Take a compatibility quiz and a slew of other health tests, sign a strict privacy agreement and give license to any sexual fantasy you've ever had. Evan Knight couldn't wait.

Gabe and Lance have been searching for their perfect third for what seems like forever. One look at the woman he and his best friend and lover Lance have chosen to claim during her time on the island, and Gabe thinks they may have finally found her.

But what if Evan isn't interested in more than the fling she signed up for? Or worse, what if she can't handle two men who are into each other too? Gabe and Lance have one week to convince Evan that the three of them belong together...and they'll use every bit of seduction in their arsenal to make sure when the fantasy ends, their reality together will only just be beginning.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit fantasmagorical sex, graphic language, ménage a trois, and hot nekkid man-love.

Falling in lust with a sexy Elvis impersonator gets complicated when Vanessa discovers the real Elvis Presley may have hoaxed his death.

Hunk of Burnin' Love

© 2007 Veronica Wilde

Summer should mean hot men and toe-curling sex—at least that's what Vanessa believes, but a bad break-up has left her spending her summer nights

alone. Then her sex life erupts into flames when she meets two very different Elvis impersonators on the same night. One is a sexy young musician who gets her all shook up in a steamy midnight swim. The other is a graying older man who looks just a little too much like Elvis Presley for comfort.

Vanessa can't help falling in love with her new summer hottie. But their burning love gets complicated when the mysterious older impersonator begins dropping disturbing hints about his true identity—hints that suggest Elvis Presley never died at all.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex and graphic language.

Chastity Cuthbert is determined to bring love and romance to the Last Frontier.

Ladies! Meet Red Hot Alaskan Men

© 2007 Nancy Lindquist

Chastity Cuthbert is in love with love. Its too bad that she's so busy working on everyone else's happily ever after that there's no time left to work on hers. Her company, The Alaskan Connection, matches single women with sexy Alaskan hunks. Business is booming. Until Dave Wellington drags his personal vendetta against outsiders right to her doorstep.

Dave Wellington, Mayor of Smithfield, Alaska won't allow Chastity's cadre of red-lipped floozies to take over his town. A she-bitch from the lower forty-eight broke his brother's heart and no one else is gonna go through that. Not if he can help it. Besides, Smithfield is welcoming tourists for the first time. The male residents need to keep their minds on business. Not sex.

Determined to change Chastity's mind, he travels to Chicago to talk her out of her plan. Chas is so pissed off at the sexy mayor that she forgets her "no one-night stands" motto. Right into Dave's bed.

Now she has to travel to Smithfield and face him. She's strong. She can face Dave again. Just because she snuck out of his hotel room in the middle of the night doesn't mean she's a big ole chicken. Right?

Warning: This book contains hot naked Alaskan guys, all looking for love. Read it at your own risk. I am not responsible for any sudden urges to go to the Last Frontier, nor travel costs incurred. Oh, and there's explicit sex too.

One hot summer night and a scorching balcony interlude light the fuse of hidden attraction between neighbors Jill Reed and Cole Adams.

One Night on a Balcony

© 2007 Samantha Lucas

Jill Reed has spent her entire life denying her sexuality, but living next door to Cole Adams the past few months has made it near impossible.

Cole is fresh off his third divorce and considers himself a one-man relationship train wreck. He purposefully keeps his lust for Jill in check because, after all, she's the kind of woman a man keeps.

Jill and Cole have been denying their bone-deep attraction for months, but one night on a balcony, passions ignite, an adventure starts and everything is about to change—forever.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, sex in a public place, graphic language.

Sometimes the truth is the greatest aphrodisiac.

Liaisons in Jubilee

© 2007 Jamie Craig

Katie Mayes is the Executive Manager for a large, east coast beach resort. Unfortunately, her boss has discovered her one secret – her seasonal flings with Caleb Beckett, the Entertainment Director for the resort. Company policy dictates no internal fraternization, especially between managers and their subordinates, so her boss gives Katie a choice. Caleb or her job.

She avoids personal encounters with Caleb, until one fateful night a week before the resort's big summer launch. Then, she runs into him at a local nightclub. When Caleb approaches her, she tries to give him the cold shoulder, but he follows her onto the dance floor where the music, her desire, and his persistence break her will. She claims it's only one more night before they break it off completely, but Caleb insists on more. Far from an ending, he views the summer as their true beginning.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language, spanking, light bondage.

A bad marriage is like a fierce thunderstorm on a fragile field of wheat. Will a proud Texas cowboy and a stubborn Boston-bred lawyer find shelter from a real summer storm long enough to rebuild their love?

Second Wind

© 2007 Dee S. Knight

Cocky cowboy Rafe Walker doesn't plan to meet a beautiful woman in designer jeans and ostrich boots at the rodeo, but the beauty catches his gaze just before the gate opens for his bull ride. Talk about losing focus! With one glance, his thoughts are of sex-scented sheets, not hard, sawdust-covered dirt.

A city girl like her would never fit in on his ranch, but a weekend in Dallas? Yes, Ma'am, she'll do just fine. Little does he expect a ride wilder than with any bull. She grabs hold of his heart and his hottest fantasies and holds on tight.

Cathy Fitzgerald, raised in a wealthy eastern family, half falls in love with the rakish cowboy after one impulsive weekend of wild sex. She returns to Boston, breaks off her near engagement and waits to hear from Rafe. After months of silence, he surprises Cathy with a proposal. It's a shock to both of them when she accepts, and moves to his ranch in nowhere, Texas.

They soon find that passion alone can't sustain a marriage. Rafe's pride and Cathy's long hours at work breed distrust and broken hearts. Giving their marriage its second wind will take an act of nature.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex and graphic language.

Life's not always about the journey, but who takes you on the ride.

Custom Ride

© 2007 K.A. Mitchell

A stint in the Air Force left Ryan MacRae with a bitter memory of life in the closet. Jeff Allstein is a mechanic who has too much to lose if his private life becomes public. The heat of their attraction boils over on a stormy summer night, but satisfying that need only makes them both crave more.

Their searing connection makes it hard for Ryan to understand the road blocks Jeff continually puts down. Ryan will have to buckle up if he's going to find love at the end of his custom ride.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit male/male sex, graphic language.

What Leilani wants, Leilani gets...and she always gets her man.

Skin to Skin

© 2007 Dionne Galace

What Leilani wants, Leilani gets. That is, until she meets the enigmatic Oliver Clayton, her new neighbor. For some reason, Oliver seems to be intent on avoiding her even though he's obviously interested. Leilani has tried to everything to get his attention, from wearing skimpy little outfits to walking a neighbor's dog six times in front of his yard. Leilani wants Oliver...and she always gets her man.

In the heat of the summer, the temperature's not only thing rising. Luckily, Oliver has that pool in his backyard and Leilani knows just how to cool off...

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language, light bondage.

Hot summer nights make people do crazy things.

Spontaneous

© 2007 Karen Erickson

Sophie Kincaid doesn't want to be attracted to her boss but she is. Sick and tired of being used by men, she's sworn them off. But her hot and now slightly drunk boss just became too hard to resist.

His girlfriend dumped him and now Ian Grey is drowning his sorrows in alcohol, something he never does. Flirting with Sophie the sexy bartender inspires him to do even more things he'd never consider. Like have hot sex with her in the storage room.

They can't deny their attraction for each other but Sophie's afraid she doesn't measure up. And what does Ian want from her anyway? She'll have a naked good time figuring it out...

Warning this title contains the following: Hot, steamy, explicit sex and graphic language.

Roping the naughty girl is all fun and games until someone falls in love.

Knotty Girl

© 2007 Maggie Casper

Shelby Langley was not sub, slave or Mistress, she was merely kinky. Point her to a BDSM club where she could watch and experience pretty much anything the mind could conjure, without the tangled web of an actual relationship, and she was in orgasmic bliss.

Long into the lifestyle, Craig Jensen was able to spot a submissive in denial from a mile away. Usually he left them be to find their own way, only keeping an eye out for their safety while on his turf, but there was something about the

sweet, young blonde who had a love for rope bondage that called for him to claim her as his own.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language, anal play and an overall spanking good time.

*When a school teacher with a backbone of steel meets a hard-nosed lawman,
more than the desert will heat up.*

Marielle's Marshal

© 2007 Beth Williamson

Marielle Bloom never expected to be the victim of a stagecoach robbery stranded in the desert in the middle of summer with a sexy marshal who sets her body on fire with one look from his steely eyes.

Marshal Ramsey Whitfield doesn't know what to make of the outspoken teacher, but he does know she feels perfect in his arms. As they trek together across the barren landscape, searching for civilization, they discover that their desire for each other is hotter than the desert sand.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language, violence.

*When a man who isn't human is accidentally enslaved by a woman who has no
idea what he is, the result is magical.*

Sealed With a Kiss

© 2007 Lila Dubois

Signing up for a one-week adventure vacation, Helena expects to be kayaking in the Pacific, not having every sexual fantasy fulfilled in her guide's bed.

Ocean is more than he seems, his kayaking business a cover for his deepest secret.

When Helena accidentally enacts old magic, enslaving Ocean, he doesn't know if she is the luckiest girl on earth, or an enemy of his kind, bent on imprisoning him forever. Ocean's strange behavior worries Helena but she's distracted by the mind-blowing sex.

After the truth is revealed, will their budding love be Sealed with a Kiss?

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language, voyeurism, and fantasy fulfillment.

When his girlfriend demands he settle down and start a family, Cole Winchester has some hard decisions to make. Marry his girlfriend, or finally own up to his taboo attraction to other men.

Taboo Desires

© 2007 Amanda Young

Cole Winchester feels like a rat, boxed into a corner. Faced with the prospect of being trapped in a passionless marriage, he makes the hard choice to end his relationship.

A run in with an old friend on the beach, propels Cole's fantasies out into the open and forces him to confront his taboo desires. Before him, lies the choice of a lifetime—embrace his desire for another man and all the pitfalls that come along with it, or return to his girlfriend and live out the safe half-life he carved for himself.

Warning, this title contains the following: explicit sex, graphic language, and hot nekkid man-love.

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