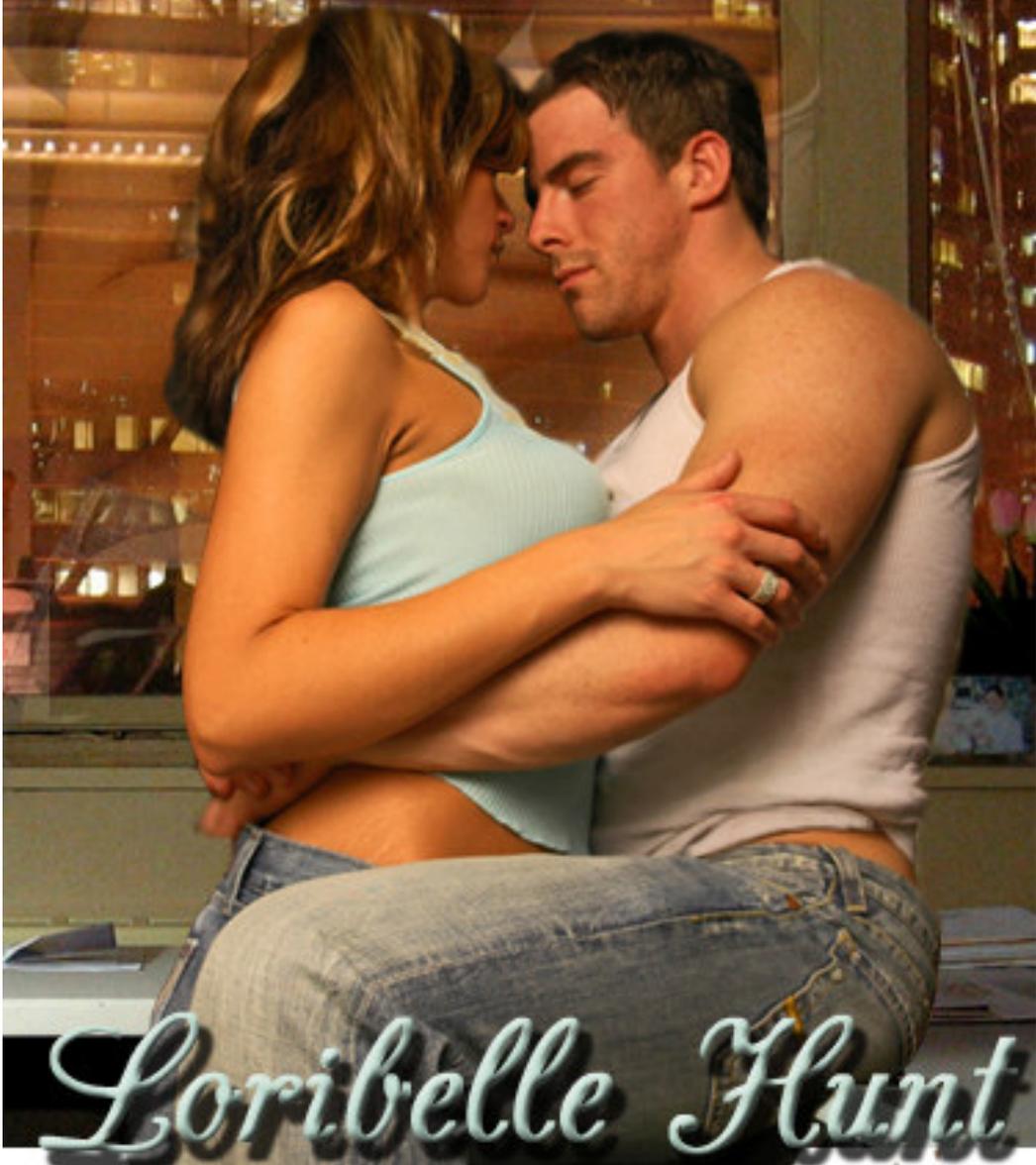




Forbidden Publications

# Be Mine



Loribelle Hunt

*Be Mine*

BE MINE

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BE MINE

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Be Mine  
By  
Loribelle Hunt

## Chapter One

Jana tugged on the short hem of the red dress. This was such a stupid idea. She didn't have any idea how Marilyn and Becca talked her into it. *Valentine charity auction, my ass. More like an excuse to get the regulars half naked on stage.* Okay, so it wasn't that bad. All her important parts were covered. Sort of. The borrowed dress was skintight, designed more for Becca's sleek, tall frame than Jana's short, curvy one. It barely covered her butt, and she was in serious danger of falling out of the push-up, low cut bodice. Despite the fact it covered more skin than her bathing suit, the dress felt indecent, self-indulgent. Sexy as hell, and she didn't *do* sexy.

"Just to make things more interesting," the emcee's voice carried through the thin wall separating the bar's stage and dressing room, "the ladies in tonight's auction will be anonymous!"

The crowd roared.

*Anonymous?*

"Oh, fun," Marilyn crowed as a waitress walked down the line of women handing out masks. Jana held her hand out for hers and received a red mask with glitter around the eyes and cheeks and red devil horns sticking up from the top. She guessed they were left over from last year's Mardi Gras party.

"If it sounds so fun, why am I doing this and not you?" she grumbled.

"Because you, my dear, are the one living like a nun." With a stern look, Becca took the mask, stretched the elastic band around Jana's head and slid it in place. She grinned. "Perfect."

“Shall we get started, gentlemen?” the emcee spoke to the crowd out front. “We have ten ladies tonight who volunteered for our yearly charity drive. Same rules as last year. The winner gets one date. Where you go from there is up to you.”

The crowd laughed, while Jana rolled her eyes. This guy needed a new shtick. They’d been coming to Tango’s for years. Every year, a few days before Valentine’s, the bar held this auction for charity, alternating sexes each year. Just her luck this was the women’s year. And Jack the Emcee slash bartender used the same line every year. It grated on her already shredded nerves.

The auction started. At the end of the line, she settled in for a long wait, turning to talk with her friends. Work had been the week from hell, and other than a few minutes here and there, she hadn’t spoken to either of them in days. They were both gone, no doubt to get front row center seats for her upcoming embarrassment.

The women in line in front of her tittered excitedly as the bidding outside went up. Eventually it ended at two hundred dollars. She felt her eyebrows raise, and butterflies took flight in her belly. That was much higher than usual. The next woman walked out, and the line slithered forward.

She tuned out the bidding, instead concentrating on how to get Marilyn and Becca back for putting her up to this. Oh, they had a good enough excuse. Jana was the only one of the three who’d never participated in the Be My Valentine Auction before. Being married had been a great excuse not to. But now, almost two years after her divorce, they’d insisted it was her turn.

She sighed. They were her friends, and they were worried about her. She got that, sure. But to put herself on display? It was such an un-Jana-like thing to do. They didn’t buy her insistence that she was over The Jerk because she didn’t date much. Why bother when it was only one man who revved her motor? And even if he was interested, which he wasn’t, he was off limits? One did not date one’s ex husband’s brother. Twin brother no less. A familiar awareness coursed through her anyway just thinking about him. Rule made her want wicked, sinful things. Things she’d never

wanted with any man, and one who was practically a relative shouldn't be an option. It seemed so taboo, forbidden.

She looked up. The waitress at the stage entrance was hissing at her. Time to go on. She wondered how she was supposed to stroll across the stage without literally showing her ass. After walking out, it took her a moment to get her bearings. She'd never seen the bar from this angle.

"A yummy morsel, don't you think gentlemen?" Jack asked the crowd. "And I have to say she's just as lovely under the mask. Now where should we start the bidding? Fifty? Do I have any takers?"

She shot him a horrified look. Was he crazy? No one was going to pay fifty dollars to go on a date with her! To her amazement someone took the offer, then someone else countered. Before she knew it the total was *one* hundred and fifty. She was assuming that was the limit when she heard the dark, honeyed voice that fueled her dreams and fantasies up the bidding again.

Rule's voice sent shivers down her spine. She longed to hear it in the darkest depths of night against her ear, whispering of the decadent things he was going to do to her and filled with the tenderness she ached to receive from him. Because as physically alluring as she found him, she wanted more. She wanted the steadiness, the strength of character, the caring and gentleness he'd shown her during the divorce. He'd backed off quite a bit in the last year. Maybe he'd sensed her desires and disapproved. Or just didn't reciprocate. But why was he bidding on her now?

She searched the crowd for him and groaned when she saw him standing at the rear of the bar. Unfortunately, it wasn't a sound of pleasure, not even the small enjoyment she got scoping Rule out anonymously behind the mask, because standing next to him was her ex, Lawe.

They looked so much alike most people couldn't tell them apart. Tall and fit, with matching green eyes, they turned heads. In personality they were polar opposites. Where Rule was calm and collected, Lawe was a force of nature, always volatile and in motion.

Now his brows were drawn down in an angry scowl, and he glared daggers at her standing under the hot lights of the stage. He recognized her. Probably worried about his image. Like this fiasco wasn't bad enough, he had to witness it?

While the bidding ended – with Rule the winner – the other women joined her on the stage for the unmasking. Jack explained that they would start with the first entrant, who would find her date in the crowd so they could make plans and move on through the line.

Jana waited her turn, watching Rule and Lawe. They were identical, yet so different. She'd definitely got the raw end of the deal when she'd married Lawe. *Young and stupid, I guess.* But that was too simplistic. True, but not the whole story.

At eighteen, fresh out of school and looking forward to getting out on her own and starting college, her parents had died in an accident. Overprotected and shy, their deaths left a big hole in her life. She'd wanted to live a little – not be left completely alone. Then she'd met Lawe. He filled up the lonely spaces. Lawe had been determined to have her. Before she knew it, she was quitting school and getting married. That's where the young and stupid part came in. And okay, a heaping dose of lonely.

Having just finished business school, he'd decided he needed a wife. Ever the fool, she'd convinced herself he loved her while he molded her into the uptight, reserved wife he wanted. She'd gone to him a virgin, and it wasn't long before he'd convinced her she was frigid. They hardly ever had sex after the first couple of years. She knew better now, though. He'd never made much effort to discover otherwise, and the first thing she'd done when they separated was find a lover.

She'd needed to know and was pleased to report, nope, not frigid. But the casual sex thing was not for her. She'd proven to herself she could have a sexually fulfilling relationship, but she'd also figured out real quick she need emotional involvement too.

Despite the years of sexual deprivation, she would have stayed with Lawe. She didn't know better after all, and she took her marriage vows very seriously. Who didn't? It was the other women that did it. That small kernel of self-respect she'd had left had rebelled loudly at continuing to live with an adulterer.

Her wool-gathering came to a hasty end when she realized the ninth woman was leaving the stage. She was up. Jana met Rule's gaze across the smoky bar, calm, steady and unreadable. She wondered if he knew who he'd won a date with? It was his bar, but she'd never seen him participate in these things before. Surely he knew?

When Jack gave the signal, she reached for the bottom edges of the mask, lifting it up, not breaking eye contact until she was forced to. There was only a split second break. When she looked back into Rule's eyes his expression hadn't changed at all. *So did he know it was me or is his poker face that good?* She'd played cards with him a few times and knew it was. Which begged the question: why? Did he know it was her? Did he think she was someone else? She didn't dare hope he was interested. She was positive he wasn't, and imagining otherwise didn't do anything but open her up to a world of hurt.

She walked down the short makeshift steps and worked her way carefully through the crowd. The heels she wore were not only much higher than her usual but slick on the bottoms. She had a mortifying vision of slipping right onto her ass in front of everyone.

Finally she was through the crowd, and the brothers were only a few feet away. Their heads were bent together, dark hair blending so one was not distinguishable from the other. Lawe looked up at her with an expression of such fury she forgot to look where she was stepping. She felt her right foot go out from under her and waited for the crash. It didn't come.

Instead she got a different kind of jolt when Rule stepped forward, taking her by the elbow. Momentum toppled her closer, and she grabbed his shoulders for support. Shocked at his touch, embarrassment over her near mishap warred with irritation at the amusement that flared in his eyes. She steadied herself pulling away, but he kept a hand on her arm. It felt proprietary, like a claiming. And Lawe didn't like it one bit. He stepped forward aggressively, practically growling at Rule.

"Get your hands off my wife, brother."

Shocked to the bone, Jana blinked, snapping her gaping mouth shut. He'd never been jealous, hadn't seemed to care about her one way or the other over the last few years. Sibling rivalry, then?

Rule chuckled, a low sound that more resembled a purr than a laugh.

"She's not your wife anymore, *brother*."

"You always wanted her," Lawe answered in a low voice.

*What? No way.* He'd always treated her like a little sister.

"Take her, then. She's all yours. She can't begin to give you what you want anyway." His laugh was a bitter scrape against her nerves. "Maybe that's the appeal. You always liked 'em trainable. She's not, you know. Frigid as the day is long."

Her face flooding with embarrassment, she grabbed Rule's arm before he could lunge at his brother.

"Don't," she choked out and glanced around them. People were beginning to take notice of the argument. "It's not worth it."

It also wasn't true, but she wasn't about to have that conversation with either one of them. Right now she just wanted to melt into the floor. Since that obviously wasn't an option, she'd settle for getting out of here and barricading herself inside her apartment with a pint of Rocky Road. *Definitely a plan with merit.*

"Sure thing, sweetheart." He gave her a brief smile then jerked his head at his brother. "Office. Now."

When he didn't release her arm, she was afraid she was going to get dragged into the middle of a family feud. Then Marilyn and Becca redeemed themselves in a major way. Giggling, they tottered over tipsily, pulling her away over Rule's weak protests. Jana wasn't fooled for a minute. Marilyn's eyes were clear in sharp contrast to her wobbly body language, and Becca rarely drank.

Jana turned to look over her shoulder, caught both men scowling in her direction before they turned to the office and slammed the door shut behind them. She released a sigh of pure relief. Time to make her escape.

"Are you okay, hon?" Marilyn asked.

“What was that about?” Becca added.

“I have no idea,” she huffed. “Could we just get out of here?”

She needed time to digest what had happened tonight. It took some fast-talking, but she convinced the girls to drop her off at home alone. Claiming fatigue, crankiness, and the need for a hot soak, she promised to call in the morning.

She settled for a quick shower. Dressed in her favorite threadbare robe, she grabbed the ice cream out of the freezer, and walked to the desk secluded in one corner of the living room. Turning on her laptop, she dug into the ice cream while the computer signed on. Licking the bottom of the spoon, she used the touchpad to open her email program and watched while it downloaded.

Right off she saw an email from a prominent review site. Her stomach knotted with anxiety. Writing had started as a hobby. Now it was a dirty little secret. She wasn't in a big hurry for anyone to discover she was writing and selling erotic romance, but she sure hoped one day she could make a good enough living at it to quit the dreaded waitressing job. She'd probably have to come clean then.

Maybe she could just move. The idea had appeal. Just disappear. Start all over in a new town, with new friends and create a new life. Invent a new Jana. As interesting as the idea was, she dismissed it as quickly as it came. She loved her friends, but the real reason was she'd miss Rule desperately. And she'd learned one thing in the ten years since her parents' deaths. It was better to deal with the heartaches life dealt out than live alone or in avoidance. She'd spent years doing the avoidance thing. No more. So when the time came to fess up her secret life, she'd find a way to do it.

She exhaled a sigh of relief, a slow smile spreading across her face. These were the kind of reviews she liked. *A fresh new voice in erotic romance...* She saved the email—she'd add a quote to her website later—moving through the rest of her inbox quickly.

When she'd flagged everything that needed her attention for later, she closed the program and opened the document that contained her latest book. Frowning, she scrolled down to reread the last few pages she'd written. It wasn't working for her. She

backspaced through a few paragraphs, then rested her fingers on the keys, waiting for inspiration to strike.

After staring at the flashing cursor and the white space she'd added since she sat down for several minutes, she ground her teeth and stood, rolling the kinks out of her shoulders. Maybe a break would help. She picked up the ice cream carton and was carrying it back to the kitchen when her doorbell rang.

Annoyance surged through her. Assuming it was Marilyn or Becca come back to badger her about the scene with Rule and Lawe, she didn't even look in the peephole before snatching the handle and jerking the door open. *Oh shit*. Big mistake. Rule leaned casually against the jam, his arms crossed over his broad chest, scowling down at her.

## Chapter Two

“Do you always answer the door after midnight in your robe?”

His voice was gruffer than he intended. *Great, dumb ass.* After that scene with Lawe, she really didn't need him berating her. But, damn, the robe didn't hide much and what it did his imagination easily filled in. She was like a vision standing there. Barely pushing 5'4, she was proportioned perfectly, from full, high breasts to her narrow waist and slightly flared hips. She glared at him through soulful brown eyes, auburn hair falling down around her shoulders. He had to stuff his hands in his pockets to keep from reaching for her.

“I thought you were Becca or Marilyn.”

That did it. Attitude justified. She hadn't even looked through the peephole. He'd been worried about his reception. Now he plain didn't care.

Rule had loved her for years. It had been bad enough when she'd been married to his brother, but how he'd managed to keep his distance the last two years he had no idea. Every date, the lover a couple of years ago—God that had been hell. It had taken all his restraint not to beat that guy to a pulp and promise a hell of a lot worse if he didn't keep his hands off Jana.

But he'd managed the restraint, because God knew she needed it. His idiot brother had been killing her spirit for years. When she'd finally come to her senses and left him, she'd needed to spread her wings, find herself again. And now when he was ready to make his move Lawe was all of a sudden worried about her? He hadn't worried about Jana when they'd got divorced, but he'd made a point of asking Rule to

watch out for her. Now he was under the impression he needed to protect his ex from his brother. Rule snorted. Well, they'd reached an agreement of sorts.

After seeing her in that dress tonight, after allowing herself to be auctioned off, Rule knew he couldn't wait any longer. A man could only take so much. It didn't matter if *she* didn't know she was his. *He* knew it. Damned if he'd let anyone else sample her again.

"Rule?" She snapped her fingers waving a hand in front of his face. "You zoned out."

His gaze zeroed in on the cleavage left exposed by the gaping neck of the robe. Oh yeah. Time to get on with the sampling. Lifting his eyes to meet hers, he took a deep breath, filling his lungs with the lavender scent of her soap. He felt overheated, constrained in his clothes, ready to get naked and inside her at the earliest possibility. Answering heat flared in her eyes.

"Invite me in," he whispered. His throat was suddenly raw. Dry like a man starving for a long cool sip of water; she was his freshwater spring.

"I don't think that's such a good idea."

He smiled. Still playing the off-limits sister-in-law. He lifted his hand to her face, rubbed the pad of his thumb across her full bottom lip. A slow smile spread across his face. It would be such a joy to make her scream in ecstasy. He'd waited so long to hear that sound. *Too damned long.*

"I think it's a very good idea."

He lowered his hand to his side, and she gasped, reaching out to lift it back up. His knuckles were raw. When her gaze flashed back to his face he saw her eyes widen as she noticed the bruise beginning to purple his jaw and the scrape under his chin.

"Oh my God." She pulled him inside the apartment, slamming the door shut. "What did y'all do?"

He grinned. Her Southern accent always came out when she was upset. She didn't like it, but he thought it was cute.

"It's okay, sweetheart. We're brothers. It's not the first fight, and trust me, it won't be the last."

Especially if Lawe kept acting like an idiot over him and Jana being together.

She rolled her eyes.

"So y'all are reverting now? From thirty-five to five in a matter of minutes?"

He ignored her sarcastic tone. Lawe would have gone crazy over it, and he was going to be the opposite of his brother in all things. Besides he didn't want to see her fragile newfound self-confidence slipping. He sure as hell didn't want to be the one who caused it.

He shrugged. "We needed to work off some steam."

She snorted, moving farther into the room and taking a seat right on the edge of her sofa. Her hands twisted in her lap, then she crossed her arms over her chest before jumping to her feet.

"I should go put some clothes on."

"Don't bother on my account."

He was pretty sure she was naked under that robe and nude meant easy access. She was already moving, but paused at the entrance to the hallway. Looking over her shoulder, she frowned, turning halfway to face him. He held his breath. The action exposed a long smooth thigh and the gentle swell of one breast. His heart slammed in his chest.

"You're acting...weird tonight. The auction, your brother, showing up here, I don't get it."

She shook her head, as he walked over to her, stepping close enough to feel the rise and fall of her chest without pressing her against the wall. She tilted her head back to meet his gaze.

"Maybe I've decided to quit pretending that I don't want you."

Her eyes widened.

"You want me?"

He nodded.

“I never knew.”

Her breath quickened, the pulse in her neck beating rapidly, and he watched the emotions flash across her face. Surprise. Acceptance. Lust followed by a pretty pink blush that spread from her face to her chest. A chest that from his current angle was completely exposed. If he stepped back a foot she'd still be covered, but he couldn't make himself do it. Fuck no. If he did that, some sense of sanity might return to him, she might kick him out; any number of things could go wrong. If that was going to happen, he had to have one taste, just one tiny taste, to tide him over.

Hell, he understood her. Lived and breathed her. This was a woman who deserved to be wooed, courted in some old-fashioned way. She trusted him, but it was a different kind of trust entirely that he wanted from her. The things he wanted to do to her...well, they didn't belong in a casual sexual encounter.

He groaned thinking about it, his cock swelling painfully. Jana spread across his bed. Jana tied to his bed. Oh, yeah. That was a plan of action he could get behind. But not tonight. Tonight was about gentle sweet loving, teaching her she wasn't deficient in any way and showing her she wasn't responsible for Lawe's shortcomings. But then she reached between them, her hand brushing against his dick nearly sending him through the stratosphere. She untied the knotted belt around her waist and blew his plans all to hell.

*Right here, man. Right against this wall. No, no, no, idiot.* He gritted his teeth, stepped back, then made the mistake that sealed their fate and looked down at her. Leaning against the wall, her breasts were pert, the robe hung open at her sides. She was – praise God – naked underneath it.

He wasn't gentle when he pushed her to the wall, grinding his hips against hers. Grabbing her hands he meshed her fingers with his and pinned them next to her face, claiming her mouth. He caught her pouty lower lip between his teeth and she moaned, darting her tongue over them. Then his tongue was in her mouth. Firm, insistent, forceful, taking them where he wanted to go.

Her chest rose and fell against his. He felt her hard nipples through the thin cotton of his shirt, knew she was turned on. Maybe not as much as him, but definitely moving in the right direction. When she started to rock with him, her pelvis moving in tandem with him, it was too much. Something inside him, some well of control, shattered. He released her wrists and with a shaking hand reached for the snap on his jeans. He struggled with it a minute while she pulled down the zipper. Once free, he shoved them down his hips, not even bothering to take them off, afraid he'd explode if he took the time. He gripped her hips, slid her up the wall stepping between her legs.

"Wait," she whispered and he groaned. Damn. "We need a condom."

He chuckled, a ragged thready sound. Ever practical. That was his Jana. He maneuvered his wallet out of his back pocket, flipped it open and pulled out the foil covered packet. Covered, he lifted her again, wrapping her legs around his waist as her thrust into her.

He froze, assaulted by sensation. Wet, warm, tight. Pleasure. Pure, unadulterated paradise. He'd been so stupid to wait so long. This was where he belonged – wrapped in her embrace, wrapping her in his.

Jana laid her head against his chest, one ear pressed flat over his heart. What did she think of that crazy staccato rhythm? Did she realize that was all her, that he'd never felt this wildness before? She shifted, lowering herself farther down his cock so he was fully inside her.

"Nice as this is," she whispered, and he heard the smile in her voice, "I think there's more to it."

Hell, yes. Reminding himself to be careful he withdrew from her slowly, wanting to drag the sensation out. Her cunt clenched around him as if protesting the movement, and he didn't make it halfway before thrusting back in. There was no gradual build up, no finesse, not even any skill. Just him slamming in and out of Jana, his hands gripping her hips hard enough to bruise, his upper body pushing her hard against the wall.

The only thing that saved him from complete embarrassment was the little sounds she made. Alternating between breathy gasps and kitten-like mewls they

pushed him. Drove him higher. When she came, her pussy convulsed around his cock, her nails raked long scratches down his arms and she cried out his name. It was all he needed it to follow her over the edge. The only thing that marred the experience was his resentment of the condom. He wanted to come inside her, no barriers, make his mark on her in a way nothing else could.

The primitive urge surprised him. He'd always been careful, never had wanted to share a woman with a child. But the idea of Jana having his baby didn't fill him with fear. As he pictured her belly growing round with their child, intense want filled him. It almost sent him to the floor, but he sagged against her and the wall instead. She'd be sexy as hell pregnant, rosy and glowing and happy. He couldn't believe he was thinking it, imagining it.

He and Lawe had agreed long ago there would be no children for them. After barely surviving their childhoods with a neglectful father and absent mother, neither wanted to take the risk of being in charge of anyone else's happiness. Lawe had gone so far as getting a vasectomy. He hadn't been quite ready to take that extreme a step. Didn't negate the need for a condom after all.

She pushed against his shoulders. He moved, leaning his shoulder against the wall next to her. A bead of moisture trickled down her neck. When it reached the valley between her breasts, he leaned over and caught it. Her skin was salty and tangy, and he regretted not having taken the time to explore it. When he looked up at her, she was blushing; her bottom lip caught between her teeth. She pushed away from the wall, tugged the robe closed and tried to walk around him and down the hall. Concerned—and maybe a little alarmed—he grabbed her by the waist and pulled her against him. He held her still with one arm while tilting her face up with his other making her meet his gaze.

"What's wrong, sweetheart?"

"We shouldn't have done this," she whispered.

He fought his anger, tried to put it where it really belonged. Damn Lawe for meeting her first then spending years making her miserable. But some of it bled over to

her. There was no way she'd faked that orgasm, there was no way she could deny how her body responded to him even now, hard nipples pressed to his chest, pulse jumping in her neck.

"Why not?"

Her laugh was soft, bitter. "Gee, I don't know. Maybe because you're my brother-in-law?"

Maybe he'd completely misinterpreted her emotions.

"Do you still love my brother?" he asked quietly. Did he really want to know the answer to that?

Snorting, she jerked out of his arms. The loss of her warmth was a cold, twisting rip in his chest. He shouldn't have asked.

"No. I don't love him." She paused, looking at him with a mixture of confusion and anger. "Don't you think this is weird?"

Was it?

"Maybe. A little." He reached for her hand slowly drawing her back into the circle of his arms. "We want each other. You can't fake this kind of attraction. I say we go with it. See where it leads."

She sighed. He knew she was going to say no, and he couldn't accept that. Distracting her would be better than bulldozing over her. Releasing her, he took a step back to remove the rest of his clothes. He held his hand out.

"Let's get cleaned up. We'll work everything out as we go."

She stared at it a long moment before sliding her gaze up to his face. He exhaled a pent up breath when she set her hand on his and nodded. Leading her down the hall, he sent a fast word of thanks heavenward. That he was familiar enough to know where he was going; that she wasn't kicking him out yet.

He walked through her bedroom into the spacious master bathroom, bypassing the garden tub. It was much smaller than his Jacuzzi and he'd always wondered if two people would fit in there. Some other time they'd give it a try. Instead he opened the

shower doors and turned on the water, adjusting the knobs until the spray was warm. He backed in, pulling her with him. It was tight, but that suited him fine.

Her silence was starting to freak him out a little, and her eyes were troubled. He wanted to know what was going on in her head but was afraid to ask. She twisted her hair into a knot holding it in place with a clip sitting on a shelf in the wall. She didn't protest when he picked up the soap, washcloth and began to bathe her. Starting with her feet, he worked up slowly, learning the curves, the dips, the freckles and scars of her body. Sighing, she leaned one shoulder against the wall. It was a long exhalation, contented, relaxed.

The water cooled too soon. He led her out of the stall and dried her off with one of her fluffy white towels. Then he followed her into the bedroom. Her nervousness was back, and she went straight for the closet.

"Don't," he said, turning down the quilt on her bed. She faced him, arms crossed over her breasts, surprise clear on her face. "I can't stay much longer. I have to close the bar. Lay down with me a few minutes."

He lifted a hand in invitation. A few minutes to hold her before he had to go. He just needed a little time to savor her body next to his.

"Please, Jana. It's a simple thing to ask."

She hesitated so long he was sure she would say no.

"I...okay."

He sat on the bed, sliding over so she could join him. She lay down, leaving several inches that felt like feet between them. He pulled the blankets up and reached for her, positioning her next to him under his shoulder. She was left with no choice but to lay her head on his chest. Her breath whispered across his chest, and his body tightened in response, blood surging once again to his cock. Her hand hovered in the air a moment, as if she was unsure where to put it finally settling on his stomach. A few inches down and she'd send him into orbit. He smiled.

"This is good, don't you think?"

She tilted her head back to look at him, a tentative smile on her lips. For a second, he was struck by a sense of unreality. She was so beautiful, and she was finally in his arms.

“Yes.” She laughed softly. “But I’m not sure how I got here. What are we doing, Rule? What are you doing?”

“We’re starting something. A new life.”

She shifted closer, her thigh coming to rest against his. He looked at the bedside clock. Not enough time to make love to her again. He rolled out from under her, lowering her to the bed.

“I’ve got to get back.”

“Okay.”

“I want to see you tomorrow.”

She shook her head.

“I’m working doubles the next couple of days. By the time I get home, I’ll be dead to the world.”

He sighed, rubbing a hand over his face.

“You’re not trying to avoid me are you?”

She grinned. “Would you let me?”

“I don’t think so.”

He leaned over her, bracing his hands next to her head, and kissed her. It was hard and possessive— and short. Anything more and he’d never make it back to the bar in time to close.

“I’ll see you soon.”

“Okay.”

Rule slipped out of the room, pausing in the hall to pull on his clothes and shoes. He was walking through the living room to the front door when a flash in the corner of his eye caught his attention. Looking for the source, he saw her laptop sitting open on the desk. He knew he shouldn’t, knew he was being too nosy, but the bright screen of

the computer drew him. What had she been doing when he arrived? He hadn't even realized she had a computer. He thought he knew everything about her.

He leaned over the desk and saw a Word document was open. He smiled. She was writing. He started to stand, but a few words snagged his attention. Cock? Pussy? What the hell was this? He read more. It wasn't like any porn he'd ever read. There was way too much emotional depth to it. But he'd never read any books with such explicit sex either. It was hot. That it was Jana's made it hotter.

He switched the view to print noted the title and a name in the header. She must be using a pen name. He had to agree with that. As sexy as it was, some idiots would no doubt confuse her with what she wrote.

Hearing shuffling behind him he spun around. She'd put the robe back on. Her arms hung at her sides, hands clenched into fists. Glaring, she moved around him to snap the lid closed on the computer.

"I didn't hear you leave."

"I was going." He smiled. "Your work caught my attention."

"That's private. And none of your business."

"None of my business?" He didn't even try to keep the anger out of his voice, and she winced. Guilt stabbed him. *Don't act like Lawe, you jackass.*

"I've waited a long time for you, Jana," he whispered, cupping her face in his palms. "There aren't going to be any secrets between us."

"Is that right?" she asked, her voice arctic cold. Breaking free of him, she walked to the door holding it open. "I think I'll be deciding the course of my future. Not you. Not Lawe. Not anyone else. And right now? I want you to leave."

His gaze zeroed on her face. She was good and pissed. He thought there was more to it than his snooping on her computer too, but she obviously wasn't going to listen to him now. Maybe in a couple of days— after two exhausting days at the restaurant— she'd be more willing to talk.

“Fine.” He stepped close to her and was rewarded by a hitch of her breathing, a hot flare in her eyes. Not as unaffected as she’d like to be. “But this is not over, Jana. This is just a reprieve.”

He stepped into the hall, and she slammed the door behind him. He couldn’t help but grin. There was no way she would have done that to his brother. Clearly, the beaten down woman of a few years ago was gone. Frigid didn’t come close to describing that temper. He wasn’t leaving with what he wanted—her heart—but had a feeling the chase was going to be amazing.

## Chapter Three

Jana's eyes were in a state beyond dry, gritty and hurting as if she'd rubbed them in sand. With only one hour left of her shift, she was trying to get all the busy work done so she could clock out as soon as her last table left. Since she didn't currently have one, she might even get cut early.

The last two days had been long and hellish. Back to back doubles on her feet at the restaurant was not her idea of a good time. But she'd traded a few shifts here and there, in effect volunteering for the doubles. In exchange, she had the next three days off. She'd had a plan when she'd arranged this schedule. Survive these two days, sleep for ten hours, then enjoy three glorious days off to write.

She could already see that was going to be a problem. Ten hours wasn't going to cut it, for one. She'd lost more than that tossing, turning and worrying about Rule the last couple of nights. She hadn't seen him, but he'd called, leaving her messages on her cell and home voice mail. Messages to see how she was doing, messages to see if she needed anything, messages asking if she ever planned to answer his messages, and finally messages demanding she at least call and let him know she was still alive. She'd eventually sent him a text message because she wasn't ready to hear his voice. She was afraid his next step was to just show up.

She had no idea what to do about him. She'd spent the time bouncing between hopeful, guilt-ridden, confused and angry. Stir, shake, repeat. Maybe she could deal with the confusion easy enough—sit him down, let him convince her. But she couldn't help but think this was another one of those weird sibling rivalries he and Lawe got into sometimes.

Did Rule want her for her? Or because she used to be Lawe's? And if—she sure as hell hoped—he wanted her for her, how long would that last? What did he want exactly? Sex? Or something more? She didn't think she could take being his flavor of the month. She'd watched him in action a long time. He was attentive, loving for short stretches, but it never stuck. She didn't want to be another notch on his bedpost.

But, God, she did want him, wanted him for more than a few weeks or months. And there came the guilt. Her ex husband's brother? Was she crazy? What would people think? She was still learning to live with other people's disapproval of her. All her so-called friends and acquaintances had left her high and dry after the divorce. Well, except Becca and Marilyn. She groaned. She'd been ignoring their calls too.

She'd been working or trying to sleep or write to take her mind off Rule. That was another problem wasn't it? She'd been furious when she'd seen him reading her manuscript. It hadn't taken long for that to turn to mortification though. He hadn't been just reading any old scene. Oh no, he was reading the kinkiest scene in the book. She was so embarrassed and full of questions. Did he think she was weird? Did he think they were fantasies or based on experience? Did he think badly of her for them?

His reputation had never hinted he might be a prude, quite the opposite actually. But until two nights ago, he'd treated her like a sister who needed watching over. How had that old attitude merged with his new knowledge? There was one sure way to find out, but she was reluctant to move forward for all the reasons she'd been going over — and over again— in her head, but mostly because of fear. Fear he'd reject her. Fear he'd think she was a freak.

After having sex with him the other night, she didn't think she could handle either of those options. It may not have been perfect, but it was raw and passionate and the best orgasm she'd ever had. She'd been shocked at herself when she'd opened her robe for him, without considering the consequences of the action. She'd wanted him so long, the opportunity was there, and she hadn't been about to pass it up. She wanted a lot more of it too, but when all was said and done she might be too chicken to go after it. She was angry for a lot of reasons, but that just about topped the list.

Tony, the manager, walked over to where she was running a sweeper across the floor.

"Why don't you take off, Jana? You're about done here and we're pretty slow tonight."

"Okay. Thanks."

"No problem." He smiled. "I see your friends just came in. Bring me your cashout and you're free to go."

She nodded, repressing a groan when she looked towards the front door. She really didn't need this now. Making eye contact with them, she nodded to a secluded table in the back. Walking to one of the restaurant's computers, she typed in her access code and entered the sequence that totaled her sales. She took the print-out and joined Becca and Marilyn.

"Sorry I haven't called y'all back." She winced at the drawl she'd worked so hard to lose. "The last couple of days have been crazy."

Becca made soothing sounds while she started sorting credit card receipts, but Marilyn watched her silently, speculation and something Jana couldn't put a finger on in her eyes. She had a moment of unease. They were up to something. She consulted the printout and started counting out the cash she owed the house tonight.

"That's fine." Marilyn answered. "We'll forgive you. If you come have a drink with us."

A drink could only mean one place, but there was no way she was up to facing Rule right now.

"Oh God. Not tonight," she pleaded. "I'm wiped out. Let's do it tomorrow."

"Nope. Tomorrow you'll have some other excuse. Tonight, we already have you in our clutches." Becca grinned. "Besides, we never got to hear what that scene was with Lawe and Rule the other night."

She was ready to do whatever it took to beg off, but one look at their faces and she knew it wasn't going to work. Damn.

"So?" Marilyn prompted. "Rule and Lawe? What was that all about?"

She shook her head. "Nothing. Just boys being boys, you know."

Becca looked ready to accept that. Marilyn wasn't about to.

"Looked like an impressive display of jealousy from Lawe to me."

"Why would he be jealous?" Her brows drew together in a frown. She'd thought so too at the time, but for the life of her couldn't figure out why. He hadn't wanted her for a long time.

"You and Rule together?"

"There is no 'me and Rule' together." Her body thrilled at the idea though. Together with Rule, preferably naked, was something she could definitely get behind.

"Oh please," Marilyn said. "He's been panting after you for years. You just never noticed."

God, could it be true? He had said as much, but she was afraid to believe it. That still didn't answer her questions about the future or his intentions. No matter what the answers were she couldn't rush into anything. She'd made that mistake once. It didn't help that Rule was enough like his brother to make her wary.

"Are you done here?" Becca asked, nodding at the neat stacks on the table.

Jana gathered it up.

"Yeah. Let me turn this in and clock out."

It only took a few minutes and they were on the way. Marilyn insisted they all go in her car. Jana watched her chances of getting out of the evening go up in smoke. When they got inside Tango's, her friends pulled her to the side right inside the door. They stood in a small circle next to the door that concealed the stairs leading to Rule's upstairs apartment. Knowing for sure she'd been tricked then, she crossed her arms over her chest. They read her well.

"Look, just go up. Say hi. Hear the man out," Marilyn said.

"He's been going crazy, Jana. Give him a chance."

"I can't believe this. You dragged me over here for Rule? What's in for y'all?" she added a little snidely.

Marilyn shrugged. "Maybe we get to see our friend get a little of the happiness she deserves. But you could avoid it. You're good at that after all, avoiding anything that might hurt in the long run."

"There aren't any guarantees in life," Becca added. "But that man is all about you. I think he loves you. It would be a real shame not to find out."

Loved her? Dropping her arms to her sides, she stared at the door. Did she dare risk her heart if he didn't? *Oh the hell with this.* Pissed at her wishy-washiness, she opened the door and went up the stairs. There was a small landing at the top with another door. Taking a deep breath, she lifted her hand and knocked. The door swung open with the contact and she peeked inside.

"Rule?"

"Hey," he called. "Back here. Come on in."

She came all the way inside shutting the door behind her. She loved Rule's place. She walked into a huge living room. The kitchen was on her left, separated from the space only by a long bar. Dropping her purse and coat on one of the stools, she turned to face the opposite wall. An expanse of floor to ceiling windows stretched the entire wall of the apartment from living room all the way back to the master bedroom. On a clear winter night like tonight, the lights of the city sparkled like stars, bright and crisp and oddly cold. It was beautiful. She could imagine snuggling up on his couch with a glass of wine and watching it for hours. Actually, that particular vision may have found its way, in one variation or other, into a book or two.

"Jana? You didn't leave, did you?"

Sighing, she turned away from the city view, entered the long hallway with trepidation. What did he have planned? Whatever it was, she was walking into it blind. The hall was dimly lit, and she was relieved to see his bedroom door, straight ahead of her at the end, was closed. That left his office, two bedrooms and a bathroom. She expected to find him in his office, the first door on the right, but it was closed. It wasn't until she reached the end of the hall that she found him, in the room between his bedroom and office.

"Wow," she said when she entered. "You've been busy."

He'd filled it with bookcases and a magnificent, huge, mahogany desk. The city night glittered in front of her and it was hard to focus on the room. Forcing her gaze away, she concentrated on the former guestroom. Books lined many of the upper and middle shelves, but several were empty around the bottom. Something every bibliophile needed—room to expand the collection. A couple of brightly colored spines caught her attention. They were familiar. Noticing the stack of broken-down boxes near the windows, she stepped the rest of the way into the room. These were her books. When she'd moved out of the house she'd shared with Lawe, she'd had to box them up and Rule had offered her part of his storage room.

"A writer needs an office, don't you think?"

She brushed away a rush of tears. It was such a sweet thing to do for her. It meant he understood how important it was to her, right?

"Hey." He walked over to her and rubbed at the moisture on her cheeks. He joked, "I don't think it's that big a deal."

She laughed and it sounded watery to her ears.

"You made me an office."

"Yeah." He stepped back looking nervous, pointing out the room's amenities. "I left a blank space over here on the wall. In case you wanted some kind of board for notes. A corkboard or one of those white boards you can erase."

She looked at the place he indicated behind the desk and thought it was a good spot. She could easily turn around, consult anything she put there.

"And maybe a low-back sofa in front of the window over there," he said, pointing to the opposite corner, grinning. "There's a view of the park. Should be a good place to daydream."

Smiling, she could imagine doing just that.

"It's wonderful, Rule. Thank you," she said softly. "But how's this supposed to work exactly? My having an office in your house."

*Right next to your bedroom, where I'm sure to go crazy.*

He stuck his hands in his pockets, thumbs hooked through the belt loops. She recognized it as his 'reasoning pose'. It came out when he wanted to sway someone to his side without alienating them. She arched her eyebrows. This should be interesting. She almost relaxed enough to smile. This was a familiar side, a Rule she recognized. The office signified something important. She didn't know what yet, but it couldn't be bad.

"Well, I think to take maximum advantage of the office, you'd have to move in."

Her heart lurched at the thought, part excitement, part terror. He was moving way too fast. The front door opened and slammed shut. Heavy footsteps came down the hall. She knew that stride and looked up in time to meet Lawe's gaze. Stepping into the room, he nodded at her, glancing around.

"Finished it, I see," he said to Rule.

What the hell? It got weirder and weirder.

"You knew about this?" she asked. "But I thought y'all..." She let the thought trail off, not sure where it was going, pretty sure she didn't have the energy to go there tonight.

Rule grinned. "We came to an agreement."

"What kind of agreement?" she asked suspiciously.

"He doesn't hurt you, and I don't kill him," Lawe said.

There was an office chair next to the desk, and she sank into it. Lawe came over, squatting down on his heels in front her, taking his hands in hers. Rule made a sound of displeasure and Lawe grinned.

"Who knew he was so possessive?"

"Who knew," she echoed weakly.

"You and I were all wrong for each other."

"Ya think? There's a shock."

She was amazed when he laughed, but he sobered quickly.

"I didn't love you the way I should have. I can't undo that, but I'm sorry for it. Rule...well, you'll have to work that out, but you'll much happier with him."

He leaned over and kissed her cheek, whispering in her ear. "He can give you what I never could."

She searched his eyes when he stood, wondering about the sudden sadness she saw there. He turned from the room.

"Later, brother. Remember what I said."

After she heard the front door close, she remembered Rule was still in the room with her.

"What did he say?"

Rule grinned. "Something about pulling me apart limb by limb."

He stalked towards her, and she resisted shrinking back into the chair. Reaching for her hands, he tugged her to her feet.

"We have a lot to talk about."

She nodded her head but quickly changed it to a shake.

"Not tonight. It's too much. I'm exhausted. My back hurts, and my feet are killing me. I need recovery time before I take this on."

She looked around the office again, this magnificent thing he'd done for her and didn't want to leave. He pulled her to the hall reaching for his bedroom door.

"I have just the thing." He grinned.

Appealing as he was, sex was not currently high on her priority list. She really was worn out. Plus, she'd been in a restaurant all day. She smelled like French fries and she felt greasy. He didn't slow at the bed, though. He didn't stop until he was standing next to a huge Jacuzzi tub. Maybe he knew her pretty well after all. She snorted. Could there be any doubt of that after the office he'd put together?

Before she knew it, he had the jets on and was removing her clothing. She tried to help, but he pushed her hands away.

"A favorite fantasy. Let me do it," he murmured.

"You fantasize about taking my clothes off in front of a bath tub?" she joked.

He met her eyes, all trace of his earlier smile gone.

“I fantasize about *stripping* you everywhere, Jana. Eventually I’ll get around to most of them.”

She sucked in a breath, floored by the carnal promise in his eyes. At that moment she didn’t want anything more. When he removed all her clothes, he helped her step over the high edge of the Jacuzzi, stripped himself and sat on the opposite side.

“Lean back and relax. Let the jets do their work.”

She followed his advice without argument. Reclining against the slope at her back, she closed her eyes resting her head on the edge of the tub. The jets pounded into her sore muscles. When Rule picked up one of her feet and massaged soap up her leg, she sighed in contentment. She drifted on the edge of sleep but was startled into sitting up straight when he stepped out, the movement forcing water up to her neck.

He chuckled. “You may just be relaxing a little more than I wanted.”

She smiled lazily in return watching him towel off, becoming more alert as he did. He dragged the cloth over his body, taking his time and watching her reaction. She didn’t try to hide her appreciation of his body. He took care of himself, worked out and ate right. It showed. Broad, well-defined shoulders narrowed to a smooth flat stomach. Her gaze dipped lower.

The rest wasn’t bad, either. She’d always thought it was tacky to measure the length of a man’s cock, but she might make an exception in this case. He’d grown hard while she watched him, and her pussy creamed in response. He covered his dick with his hand stroking up and down a few times. A drop of pre-cum beaded on the end. She leaned over the edge of the Jacuzzi to lick it off. He jerked, a soft groan coming from deep in his chest.

“Wait right here.”

He left the room and she leaned back again. Smiling, she wondered what he was up to. Definitely something. She got the impression she’d been smoothly maneuvered exactly where he wanted her.

“Okay. Out you get.”

She opened her eyes to see him standing next to her with a towel spread wide, ready to dry her off. His eyes widened when she stood, admiration for her water-slick body gleaming back at her.

Stepping over the side, he wrapped her in the towel, mummifying her in the process. He kissed her, his lips firm and insistent, and she opened her mouth, felt his tongue sweep through it. She leaned into him, answering his passion. Her nipples were hard against the cotton of the towel. As sensation shot through her, she gasped against his lips. It seemed to jolt him out of the moment and he stepped back. He dried her quickly, took her hand and led her into the bedroom.

She stopped over the threshold and looked around in awe. He really was going all out. He'd opened all the curtains and the lights of the city glittered around her. As if that wasn't enough, he had placed candles around the room. Dozens of them. Their sparkling flames dimly lit the space, giving it a romantic ambience. She couldn't have written it better, and she'd tried. She shivered, and he took her hand.

"You're cold. Get in bed and I'll warm you up," he said with an exaggerated leer.

She laughed as she approached his bed. She loved this bed. She and Lawe were here the day it was delivered; she'd coveted it ever since. It was a high, old-fashioned four-poster; the kind of thing she always pictured in an old manor house. There was a fancy stool to step up to it that Rule had bought for looks but she actually needed.

After getting in she scooted over to make room for him. He pulled the covers up and leaning on his elbow, dropped a light kiss on her nose. He looked serious when he sat up.

"Do you trust me?"

She looked around the room, the fantasy he'd somehow known to bring to life. She thought of the office, which was a dream come true for any writer. She loved him, had for years, but did she trust him? Considering the last few years, the way he'd helped her get through life on her own— over and over again, even when he had better things to do—she had to say yes. He'd always come through for her.

"I do."

He grinned. "You just keep practicing saying that, sweetheart."

Her heart skipped a beat. Surely he wasn't suggesting she say that in a more permanent setting? She didn't have time to consider it because he took one of her wrists, wrapping a soft scarf around it before securing it to one of the posts. He repeated the action with the other wrist, and she thought her heart would stutter to a halt. It was another fantasy. She looked at him suspiciously. How could he know? She focused on the candles again. Unless he'd read...

"I may have read a couple of your books," he said, pulling the blankets away from her body, spreading her thighs wide to accommodate his hips as moved between her legs.

She moaned at the contact, her blood heating up, and lifted against him, nudging his cock closer to the entrance of her pussy. He chuckled while shifting backwards.

"Oh, no. I can't believe my first time making love to you was against a wall, and then I had to rush off. This time we take it nice and slow."

Leaning over, he circled one nipple with his tongue. It puckered, and he took it between his lips while he found the other one with his fingers gently plumping it. Moaning, she moved her hips against him again. She wanted him inside her while he played with her breasts. She was right on the edge of orgasm. All it would take to push her over would be him thrusting into her pussy.

Panting, she tugged at the restraints around her wrists, choking back a sob when they held. Maybe this wasn't such a great fantasy after all. He lifted his head, his hot gaze clashing with her pleading one.

"Trying to get free already?"

"Please, Rule. Nice and slow is so overrated. I want you inside me *now*."

"But I'm not done exploring yet," he answered, proving his point by sliding down her body, licking and kissing as he went. He stopped between her legs and blew against her pussy. Her hips came up off the bed. She was panting in earnest now.

"You never answered me about moving in," he asked between flicks of his tongue over her clit.

That was definitely *not* playing fair. She could barely string together a coherent thought and he wanted to chat? And about something pretty damned serious, in her opinion?

"Too soon," she panted. "Could we talk about this later?"

"This works." He grinned. "I have your undivided attention."

Her laugh ended abruptly when he pushed his hands under her, lifting her hips closer to his face. One finger rubbed over her anus and she held her breath. Would his exploration extend there? She'd always wanted to try it, had talked to other writer friends about it to research. People fell into the 'hate it' or 'love it' camp. There didn't seem to be any in between. She suspected she'd like it.

Watching him like a hawk she couldn't miss the promise or question in his eyes when he sucked one of his fingers into his mouth. When he moved it back to the entrance of her asshole, its wetness pushed against her. Her body contracted against the unusual invasion, and she forced herself to relax.

"Have you done this?"

She shook her head, pressing against the pillow. "No."

"Hard to write about something you don't have any experience with."

"I have a fertile imagination."

He'd pushed the finger deeper while he spoke, and when he finished speaking he put his tongue to other uses too, thrusting it in and out of her in slow in lazy strokes. She knew she wouldn't last long, welcomed the energy building in her body. It rose, pushing her higher, winding her tighter, until it was too much to take, and she exploded. Her body shuddered with contractions; her mind felt shattered.

Eyes closed, she was dimly aware of him crawling up her body, of him untying the scarves. He held her until the shivering passed then he rolled over on top of her. She felt his cock at the entrance of her pussy and waited, breathless, for him to enter her. She'd just had the best orgasm of her life, and she had a feeling he wasn't planning on letting her stop at just one. But he just hovered over her.

She opened her eyes and met his gaze. They were filled with so much emotion her throat closed against the questions that clamored in her mind. She'd wanted him to look at her like that for so long, but now that he was she had no idea how to react. Lifting a hand, she pushed a lock of hair away from his eyebrow while waiting for him to speak. She could see he was trying to choose his words carefully, as his lips parted to speak but closed again many times. He seemed to choose action over speech, entering her in one smooth thrust.

"It's after midnight. Valentine's Day," he whispered, his voice raspy and strained, his face tense. "Be mine, Jana. Move in."

It was a crazy idea. They knew each other well, but not like this. She was afraid he'd change his mind. His track record for committed relationships sucked, and moving in together was a major commitment. She understood he was asking now because her defenses were down, but she couldn't find it in her to blame him for that. She'd wanted this too.

"I think it's a little soon to be thinking about moving in here." Even if she desperately wanted to.

He smiled, thrusting quickly a few strokes but adjusting to a slower pace. Pleasure curled in her belly.

"It's a great idea. I know you think I can't commit to a relationship, but I never had a reason to. The woman I love was married to someone else."

She took a deep breath. Was that true? She knew he loved her—she could see that in his eyes. But the rest of it? Come to think of it, she didn't believe he'd dated much at all the last couple of years. He wasn't going to stifle her newfound creativity either, not after building her that great office. She wanted to do it, but was she ready to take this step? He must have seen the indecision in her gaze, and he pressed his advantage.

"I love you Jana. You love me too, don't you?"

She nodded, whispered. "Yes."

"Don't make us wait anymore. We've wasted too many years already."

He knew just what button to push, but it didn't matter. Instinct told her they'd be good together. They were already sleeping together, and she had a feeling she'd be spending a lot of nights here anyway. She'd keep her job, her apartment. If one of them changed their minds, she'd have a way out.

"Okay."

"Thank God. You had me worried there for a minute."

His smile was radiant, and she answered with one of her own. As if remembering where they were, how they were connected, all the laziness left his body. He tensed, his strokes growing intense, faster, harder, until it was all she could do to hang on. The pleasure spiraled higher, and she stopped fighting against it, let it break through. She cried out when she came, but she couldn't hear it over the sound of his answering roar.

## Epilogue

Rule glanced at his watch as he took the stairs two at a time. Almost three p.m., Valentine's Day. He'd already wasted half a day inventorying the new delivery. He was glad someone else was covering the bar tonight.

It was the one-year anniversary of Jana's first night in his apartment. One year ago, he'd convinced her to move in and give them a chance. It had been a phenomenal year. After the first three months, she'd given up her apartment. He'd tried to be cool about that, but he couldn't deny what a big deal it was to him. He'd spent the next month on a cloud.

She took longer quitting the waitressing job she hated, but after six months she finally let it go too and made the adjustment to full time writer. He'd been curious what living with an author would be like and had discovered it had definite advantages. He grinned. Research for one. He apparently made a handy test subject. She kept odd hours for another. She was just as likely to be up at four a.m. when he dragged himself upstairs as she was to be up bright-eyed and fresh hours later. He used to wonder if she ever slept until he'd come up for something early one evening and found her curled up on the sofa in her office. He'd covered her with a blanket and crept out. When he came home from closing the bar later that night she was wide awake, typing away.

He reached the landing and twisting the knob pushed the door open. This was his favorite part of the day—coming home. He didn't expect her to be awake but he called out anyway.

"Honey, I'm home."

"Back here!"

He was surprised when she answered but grinned at her choice of words. They echoed his own from a year ago. He hurried down the hall, knowing he'd find her in her office. She was opening a bottle of champagne.

"Hey, I wanted to save that for tonight." He stepped close to her, claimed her lips in a lingering kiss. He whispered, "I have plans for you tonight."

She grinned. "Get your own champagne then. This is for *my* good news."

He arched his eyebrow and fought a smile, pretty sure he knew what was coming.

"Well?"

She poured two glasses handing him one.

"I sold the book."

He smiled. The romance she'd labored over had sold to a New York publisher. It was an incredible step for her.

"Congratulations, sweetheart."

He clinked his glass against hers and sipped. Not his drink of choice, but this was her moment and he'd share in it. Maybe push up the schedule he'd planned for their evening.

"So I'm going to be married to a famous author."

She smiled. "Except we're not married."

She was still resistant to the idea of marriage. He knew he'd change her mind eventually, but he'd prefer sooner.

"You are going to say yes one day, aren't you Jana?" he teased. "Put me out of my misery?"

"Are you ever going to ask? You do a lot of demanding and assuming, but very little asking."

Oh, he'd asked. He'd demanded, cajoled, begged. When he looked in her eyes, he saw expectation. Maybe she was ready to be asked now. He sat his glass down on her desk then reached for hers, placing it there too. He stepped closer to her circling her waist with his arms. She smiled up at him.

“Will you marry me?”

Stretching up on her toes, she murmured before kissing him, “I thought you’d never ask.”

## AUTHOR INFORMATION

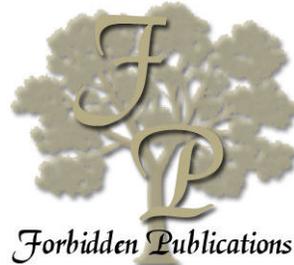
**Loribelle Hunt**

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As a native of the South, is it any wonder Loribelle has a love of story telling? She started writing seriously as a teenager and finished her first manuscript, a mystery, when she was 19. After a few bumps along the way and stints as an Army MP, a waitress, a book store manager, a student, and a wedding photographer, she turned to writing full time.

She divides her time between a husband, three kids, writing, and a part time photography gig. She is also a member of Romance Writers of America and Passionate Ink.

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