



Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

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Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

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Mia Romano

Dedication

For the women who struggle, yet remain strong through it all.
Keep dreaming and reaching for your special place in life. It's out there
waiting for you to embrace it.

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

Chapter One

Aaron Montana watched the thick cigarette smoke curl around the beautiful woman performing on stage. He wondered if the money she received in tips was worth being treated like a pole-dancing stripper.

Stepping down from the stage, Bailey Carson strummed her guitar, singing her latest country song in the crowded honky-tonk bar in Nashville, Tennessee. Every night that she walked the aisles between the tables, men would stuff a few bills in the pockets of her tight jeans, slurring out a suggestive comment or two.

Aaron sat at the back in his usual spot, wondering if she ever got tired of it all. He loved the way her violet-tinted eyes sparkled when the crowd pounded the tables, begging for one more song. The low sultry twang of her voice soothed him more than any whiskey. Did she go home alone every night to a run-down apartment overlooking the street-lined bars below? Was she trying to support six kids that an ex-husband had abandoned her with? He'd read in a tabloid that she was single, but it hadn't given much more about her private life other than she liked her privacy.

He knew she couldn't possibly be making that much money as a bar singer. It was part of the reason he always liked to tip her generously. A woman with Bailey's talent and beauty shouldn't have to struggle so hard, walking the lonely path of life. But then again, wasn't he guilty of being a loner himself?

Mia Romano

Aaron pushed himself from his table, downed the rest of his watered-down bourbon and coke, and walked to the front to place a twenty in the tip cup. Too bad the drunken fools who padded her back pockets wouldn't remember a word she'd sung by morning.

He didn't need four or five drinks to forget whatever ailed him. Watching the dark-haired beauty as she performed her magic had him walking around in a stupor. So why couldn't he bring himself to ask her to dinner, or even say hello? Hadn't he paid his dues from a broken heart long ago?

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With each blink of the neon cowboy hat across the street, another teardrop slid down her cheek. She'd sung her heart out tonight, as she did every night, and it seemed no one really paid attention. Sure, she'd racked up on tips, but only after four hours of smoke, lights, and losing a pound of sweat.

Maybe her father was right—it was time to give up on her silly dream and move back home to Ohio. None of her family had ever so much as graced a table at Slick Willie's to hear her sing. According to her mother, she was a disgrace to her family.

The bitter words still stung like rubbing alcohol in an open wound. That's exactly why she'd changed her name, gotten a new identity. As far as Bailey was concerned, she didn't have a family. She'd never been Clair Baker, oldest daughter of Mountain Ridge Church's preacher, Karl Baker.

Shattering glass and an outburst of cursing snapped her out of her self-pity. She should be used to the domestic disputes of her neighbors after six months of listening to the once-a-week brawl-down-the-hall.

She put her ear to her living room wall. Things seemed to be getting violent this time. From the sound of the thud against a hallway door, it sounded as if a body-slammng match was taking place. Bailey decided it was time to call to 911 before someone was seriously injured.

Within a few seconds of placing the call, a gun blast rang out, followed by a woman's terrified scream. Bailey fell to the scratched

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

hardwood floor in her living room, trapped in the middle of the frightening nightmare on the other side of her wall. She hoped like hell it wouldn't take the emergency crew long to respond.

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Aaron was looking forward to a quiet evening at the fire hall. It was the type of night where he could prop up his feet and fantasize about Bailey Carson. He missed the nights he couldn't go watch her sing. But the call that came in changed his plans within the next few minutes.

"Great, looks like another domestic dispute down on Seventh Street." Aaron threw on his fireman's hat. "How many does that make this month?"

His partner, Bill Phillips, shrugged his shoulders and hoisted himself into the driver's side of engine 344. "I know we've had more emergency calls than fires." Bill flipped the sirens. "Not that the lack of fires is a bad thing..."

"Yeah, but this deal over on Seventh Street is getting old." Aaron fastened his seatbelt. "Wonder when Marla Simpson's going to get tired of it and kick this guy's ass out on the street?"

"That's the thing about a lot of these domestic disputes; it's like an addiction with so many of the women. For some reason, they keep hoping the next time things will be different." Bill wheeled out of the fire hall. "I had an aunt who'd go back to my no-good drunken uncle every time."

"Shhh... Listen." Aaron turned up the police scanner in the cab of the fire truck. They've upgraded the emergency call. They're saying there's been a report of gun fire."

"Maybe she's finally gotten some sense knocked into her and done the ol' geezer in for good. I hope she shot him right in the family jewels."

"That's a little harsh, isn't it Bill?"

"After you've been doing this as long as I have, you kind of develop a cold heart, I'm afraid. Just wait and see—you'll end up cold-hearted too."

There was more truth to the statement than Bill knew, Aaron

Mia Romano

thought, scratching the stubble on his chin. He'd developed that cold-hearted attitude when he'd found his ex-wife in bed with his boss three years ago. He should have been more attentive, not worked so many long hours. Maybe he'd still have a wife if he'd taken time to be married to something other than his job. Leaving his job as assistant vice president of a Fortune 500 company was the only *good* decision he'd made in his thirty-two years of life.

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Emergency crew and squad car lights flashed along Seventh Street, blinking in time with neon signs. It reminded Aaron of a chaotic carnival of curiosity seekers, reporters and photographers, all wanting their share of the action. It was sad how a tragedy could create such an attraction.

Within fifteen minutes, the rescue squad had covered Marla Simpson's body, pronouncing her dead at the scene. Aaron shook his head, trying to gather his thoughts and calm his nerves. No matter how many times he witnessed such a tragedy, he never got used to it. Maybe he wasn't cut out for this line of work. He'd nearly convinced himself to trudge back into the corporate world where the only death he'd witness would be one of a workaholic.

When he shot a glance back at the building roped with the telltale yellow caution tape, nausea overtook him.

"Hey, what's the matter?" Bill stalked his way beside of him. "You're gonna have to develop a stronger stomach if you plan on surviving in this line of work." He reached in his jacket and tossed a pack of Roloids in Aaron's direction. "I'm going over to listen to what the witness has to say. I think I know the woman. Want to come along?"

Aaron's first inclination was to say no as he looked up, spotting the woman giving her statement to the police. His stomach did a flip-flop, but not from nausea. Bailey Carson was standing there shaking, pointing back at the building, and trying to hold a cup of coffee steady.

He removed his fire hat. "Yeah, I'll go." His heart skipped a few beats as he stared at Bailey. "I think that's the woman who sings down at

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

Slick Willies." Aaron studied her harder. "Yeah, I'm sure of it.

"You mean the one you talk about down at the station while lustful drool drips from your mouth?" Bill smacked his arm with a chuckle.

"Naw...you got it wrong. I'm pretty sure that's Clair Baker. Some things don't ever escape you...like her. She was the homecoming queen back at my old high school." He squinted as they approached her. "Yep...that's her alright. I never thought she'd end up living in a place like *this*. Just goes to show you the people you think are most likely to succeed, sometimes don't."

"I think you talk too damn much." Aaron popped another antacid in his mouth.

"All I'm saying, is if she's changed her name to this Bailey woman, she did a right smart thing. I wouldn't want the people in my hometown knowing I lived in a dump like this."

Aaron saw red, punching Bill in the jaw before he even realized he'd raised his fist. Later he wondered why he'd had such a knee-jerk reaction. He'd never been one to lose his temper or be violent. And when Bailey had turned around, she'd looked him straight in the eye with fright and confusion. Damn, if he didn't blow everything he did. He had about a snowballs chance in hell of getting a date with her now.

Why would she want to date someone who, for all she knew, could end up being a personal domestic dispute of her own?

The thought sucked about as much as being on probation for his little public display. He'd probably be fired when the city board members reviewed the incident.

So here he stood, alone in the fire hall and assigned kitchen duty for the next two weeks. Aaron stirred the simmering pot of beef stew with such vigor, half of it splashed from the pan, causing pieces of meat and potatoes to singe on the burner. Of course, the smoke alarm sounded while curls of smoke permeated the air.

"Shit!" He started waving a kitchen towel around the alarm, circulating air to silence the high-pitched madness. He combed his fingers through his thick, dark hair. Why had he bothered to get up this morning?

Setting the stew on the back burner, he slammed the lid down, and

Mia Romano

went to wash one of the fire engines. As he slid down the firemen's pole, a wicked thought crossed his mind. The image of Bailey, privately dancing around that very pole just for him, filled his thoughts. It was a fantasy he conjured up in his mind far too often. One he knew would probably never become a reality. Yet, as he pulled out the water hose, a vivid image of her slithering around in a g-string and black-laced boots, singing in a sultry voice, had his cock hard with longing.

He shut off the water and hooked the hose back in position, then headed to the locker room for an ice-cold drenching. He really needed to get his emotions in check where it came to Bailey Carson. Maybe he needed to stop being a regular at Slick Willies and concentrate on the house he was building on the outskirts of town. He'd been dragging his feet on the completion of it. Somehow, he'd lost his enthusiasm over the project.

If he poured himself into laying the brick and putting up sheetrock, he wouldn't have time to think about those violet eyes, and the way her cute little ass filled out those tight jeans.

So why was he sitting at the back table of Slick Willies six hours later, doing something he never did, like downing his third bourbon and coke?

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

Chapter Two

Bailey spotted him near the back of the bar sipping on his drink. Every Tuesday night she watched him from the safe distance of the stage. Why she found herself drawn to him was beyond her. Especially since she'd seen him hit his partner the other night. Of course, her father always told her she was drawn to things that weren't healthy for her. Maybe that explained why she felt like a person sinking in quicksand when she gazed at those dark, dangerous eyes of his.

Truth was, he probably didn't even notice. She was just cheap entertainment for the evening, like she was to everyone else trying to forget their problems. But somehow Bailey felt the one thing that could make her forget *her* problems was leaning back in his chair, looking amused from the back table.

Maybe she'd get courageous and work the room a little farther down the aisle tonight. She wanted a closer look at the man who filled her dreams with hope, promise, and sexual fantasies. The amused twist of his lips had her thinking how that mouth would feel running up her inner thigh.

Funny, after singing the same song so many times, she could do it without concentrating, like she was on autopilot. It left far too much room for thinking about the way he looked in that tight black T-shirt with well-toned muscles extending from the sleeves.

She waited until she sang her most requested song, *Close to Loving You*, before moving in his direction. Noticing the way his eyes lit up, she

Mia Romano

smiled and turned from his table.

When she felt his hand slip the twenty he'd been holding up in her back pocket, she wondered why he hadn't put it in the tip jar like he usually did. Had he drunk more than usual? Did the touch of his hand against her make him hard with desire?

Little did he know the brief brush of his hand made Bailey's pussy wet with desire, ready to throw down her guitar and drag him to bed. A vibrator might be a girl's best friend, but sometimes there just wasn't any substitute for the real thing.

Something had snapped in Bailey the other night while she lay helpless on her floor. She'd made a decision that she needed to be stronger, somehow braver, if she was going to survive in this world. And being bold included going after what she wanted in her career, *and* her bed. The rough edge to the man sitting at that back table, stirred an odd excitement in her. One she couldn't explain, but intended to explore.

* * * * *

The city board had let him off easy. Aaron was put on a two-week suspension with no pay, and when he returned, he'd be on probation for three months. Plus, he'd been given KP. Three months of cooking and scrubbing pans until he could see his reflection in them was enough to drive him crazy. If he ever so much as balled his hand in a fist around any of his co-workers again, he was a goner.

Bill wasn't speaking to him, and was still nursing a nasty bruise around his left jaw. Aaron was certain when they started riding together again the tension would be tighter than a knot in a fire hose. Well, fuck Bill. He'd do it again if he made another nasty comment about Bailey.

In the meantime, the free hours left him no excuse not to work on his house. When he'd started the project, he'd been thinking of filling the rooms with children one day — another pipe dream. Now he felt certain he'd be living in a three-bedroom house alone. When it neared completion, maybe he'd just stick a For Sale sign in the front yard and stay in his cramped apartment. He'd just consider it another investment like

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

the many others that had proven quite profitable. Maybe he'd become a building contractor and start a development someplace.

"To hell with the fire department." Aaron slammed a piece of drywall in place, punching the button on the nail gun with added force. He was good with his hands—been building things since he was a kid. Of course, his ex-wife would have said his hands were useless in the bedroom.

Had he been that lousy of a lover? Hell, no. She'd enjoyed his hands working their magic, and her screams of ecstasy proved it. Unless she'd faked it all those years. He'd heard tales of several women who faked it on a regular basis. But he'd bet his last dollar that Bailey'd never fake an orgasm. And he had a feeling she'd enjoy the little flicks of his tongue against her clit.

Bailey Carson was a woman who would embrace her passion and needs with full-force. How could she not with the way she put so much emotion in her songs?

Damn, now he'd gotten himself all worked up, needing a release. Why didn't he just ask her out and put an end to this self-torture?

Thank goodness the bathroom was complete with running water and a working shower, because five minutes later, he was relieving himself as he rubbed the slippery soap up and down his cock. Visions of backing Bailey up against that same shower wall played in his head, thinking of how it would feel to penetrate her sex. It caused him to climax with a force he'd never experienced. Once wasn't enough, as his cock hardened yet again, begging for another release. He'd never been able to come twice in a row—thought it impossible—until now.

* * * * *

Sitting in her regular booth at the small coffee shop, Bailey spread the packet of cream cheese on her bagel. She's grabbed a copy of the *Nashville Times* to browse while leisurely sipping her coffee.

It was rare that she had the luxury of sitting in the coffee shop for more than the fifteen minutes she allowed for breakfast. But this was the

Mia Romano

new Bailey Carson. The one who was going to start embracing life, exploring new avenues, and going after what she wanted.

She took a second look at the headlines on the front page of the paper:

Local Fireman, Aaron Montana, Remains With Fire Department After Assault

So, that was his name. She browsed the article for more information, reading Aaron's statement of why he'd punched his partner. The article didn't say exactly what words were exchanged between the two, just that a very inappropriate comment had been aimed at Aaron Montana about someone he was involved with.

Bailey laid the paper down, folding it neatly so the main headline was folded inside, out of her view. From the sound of the article, it must involve a girlfriend or possibly a wife. Here she was obsessing over a man whose name she hadn't even known, and he was possibly married. She hadn't thought to check his left hand for a wedding ring the other night. How could she be so stupid?

"Excuse me." A man approached her table. "Aren't you Clair Baker—1988 homecoming queen of Buckeye High School, I believe it was?" He shifted himself into the seat opposite her before she could decline his company.

She studied his face noting the bruise around his jaw line. "Um...do...do I know you?"

"Oh, I think you do, Clair. I'm the guy that got punched the other night during that nasty little domestic dispute in your apartment building. My name's Bill." He extended his hand. "Bill Phillips. I guess you don't remember me."

"Mr. Phillips, I don't mean to be rude, but my name isn't Clair. It's Bailey Carson."

A smirk crossed over his face. "Yeah, sure you are. Lots of people change their name when they come to the big city. You know what the nickname is for this area? Nash Vegas—there's a reason they call it that."

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

"And I'm sure you're about to tell me." Bailey took an immediate dislike to the man.

"Yep. So many people come out here to take a gamble on becoming famous. They line the streets with their guitars and tin cups, hoping to snag a music agent. Some of them come out here with nothing but the clothes on their backs and a few guitar picks. So, you see, it's a different kind of gambling, but the stakes are just as high as playing a game of blackjack in Las Vegas."

Bailey had heard enough. "Well, thank you for sharing that bit of wisdom. So what does all of this have to do with me?"

Bill leaned forward until he was only inches from her face.

"Because you're the reason I got punched in the face, Clair. Or as you prefer to be called—Bailey. My partner Aaron Montana stood up for you the other night. And it was all because he's got lustful eyes for you." He leaned in closer, nearly touching her nose with his. "He just needs to fuck your brains out and get it over with."

Before she could respond, Bill pulled himself from the table and shot out the door. Bailey's hands shook with anger. She'd never been so insulted. And what if it were true? What if Aaron Montana had it bad for her? If there was any truth to the statement, she intended to find out. She was going to pay a visit to Mr. Aaron Montana, personally.

Bailey walked the sidewalks of Nashville to her apartment oblivious to her surroundings. Normally she loved to inhale the scents the first signs of fall brought with it. She'd always loved how the trees took on the deep burgundy and orange hues. Today, she looked straight ahead, seeing nothing but the horrid face of a man named Bill Phillips.

She remembered him from her high school days, although she hadn't admitted it to him. He'd been the leading quarterback on the football team. He'd had an overgrown ego back then, and it appeared to have gotten much worse with time instead of mellowing. She resented his statement of the town where she'd chosen to start her music career. Bailey herself had packed her few belongings in the back of her beat-up station wagon and headed south to chase her dreams.

One day she fully intended to grace the stage of the famous Ryman

Mia Romano

Auditorium. Determination and honest hard work would get her there.

“Shit,” she burst out when she struggled with the key in her apartment door. It was the second time this week it had gotten stuck in the lock, preventing her from getting into her living space. Finally, one hard twist to the right and it unlatched. What had started out as a rare peaceful day was turning into a nightmare. So much for her plans for her only day off.

Pouring a glass of wine, she tried to calm her nerves. Normally she never drank a drop of anything before five in the evening, but today was an exception. She was going to bend a few other rules while she was at it—one being a visit to the fire hall. If Aaron was there, she’d confront him with Bill’s accusations, and if it were true, well...it was going to be no-holds-barred. She wouldn’t need that vibrator stuffed in her nightstand; she was going after the real thing. Bill Phillips might not realize it, but he’d opened a door that she’d been dying to go through.

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

Chapter Three

"Look, I know you're banned from being at the firehouse for the next two weeks, but we've got a mess on our hands," Travis Wilkes yelled through the phone. Travis was the chief firefighter over Aaron's crew. "We've had a call come in from over at the Ryman. There's been a bomb threat and the smoke alarms are having a field day on top of it. It's going to take every crewmember we have. I'm ordering you to come in and man the station while we go out on the call."

Aaron blew a long breath through his teeth. "What do you want me to do?"

"I'll need for you to get to the station ASAP. You know we can't leave it unmanned. And while you're there, maybe you can cook us up some grub. We're going to have a bunch of tired, hungry men when we get back. You know how these things go. Probably be there for hours. And if we let anything happen to the Ryman...well..."

"I know, I know." Aaron threw up a hand toward the ceiling. "It's an historic landmark and all that."

"You got that right. Now head on over." Travis disconnected as Aaron heard the sirens in the background.

Aaron flipped his cell phone shut. So much for getting the rest of the drywall done on the house, he thought. He'd just have to take his shower down at the station to get the grit and grime off.

By the time he pulled his truck into the lot, all the engines were out and the place was nearly dark. He was going to do some serious thinking

Mia Romano

about leaving the fire department to start his own contracting business. The work on the house was coming along nicely, and he was enjoying doing most of it himself, more than he thought he would.

Aaron shoved his key in the lock and headed to the shower, spotting the note from one of the guys taped to the fire pole.

Hey, Montana—we want a full-course meal waiting on us when we get back! It was signed, *Engine #59*.

Laughing it off, he balled up the note and trashed it. He was going to miss most of the guys if he left, but he wouldn't miss Bill, who he'd looked up to and considered a friend before he'd seen him for what he really was. Aaron had a feeling that Bill was vying for revenge.

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Bailey pulled the coconut macaroon bundt cake from the small oven in her kitchen. She'd always heard firemen loved to eat, and she owed them a thank you for coming to her aid earlier in the week. She enjoyed cooking on the few occasions that she was home to do it. Even if her pantry stayed on the sparse side, she did the best with what was on hand. She'd shoved Bill's comments to the back of her mind, concentrating on the chance of seeing Aaron Montana.

After showering and putting on her favorite black lace bra and panty set, her thoughts turned to the man who occupied her dreams each night. She'd give anything to have him in her bed, and wondered what kind of lover he would be. Somehow she knew he would be very thorough and giving, maybe even a little rough. The thought excited her as she slipped on her worn jeans and the crop top that rode just above her belly button.

With a warm cake in her hand, and with thoughts of seeing Aaron heating up her body, she froze at the door to the fire hall when she arrived. She'd never been shy, not even as a small girl—something that got her into trouble more often than not.

Smoothing a brave smile across her lips, she hit the buzzer on the outside of the glass door, noticing it was somewhat dark inside, and there

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

wasn't a fire truck in sight. She tapped on the glass one more time a little harder.

* * * * *

There he sat, staring at that damn fire pole again, thinking of Bailey seductively twisting her supple body around it. The odd pounding on glass shattered him from the fantasy as he stood to look in the direction of the noise.

"Shit, I must be losing it," he muttered when he saw the woman come to life right outside the fire hall. And she looked so real. More beautiful than she'd been the last time he'd gone to hear her sing. She was holding something in her hand that looked like...well...food.

Ahh, food of the goddess, it looked like cake. The angel standing outside the door was bringing him *dessert*. He thought about the kind of dessert he'd like for her to serve up, when he saw her turn to walk away. "Wait...come back...don't leave!" He ran to unlock the door.

He watched in fascination when she swiveled her hips and turned with a look of confusion. Relief spread through him when she approached the door again.

"Bailey...Bailey Carson?" Aaron questioned in disbelief. "Um...is that really you?" he said as he swung the door open.

"Live and in person, but it depends on who you ask." She blushed slightly, handing him the cake. "I wanted to bring a little something by for you all...as a thank-you."

Here he was standing like a fool, holding the cake in his hand, and nearly drooling on top of the foil-covered confection. "Oh...sorry, um, come in. Thanks for thinking of us. You know how we firefighters like to eat." He laughed, thinking what a bumbling idiot he must sound like.

Bailey slid around him. "I have a confession," she said as she brushed past him.

"Oh? What kind of confession would that be?" Aaron held his breath, studying the way her silky brown hair curled around her shoulders. He'd give anything to run his hands through those strands of

Mia Romano

angel hair.

"I came here for more reasons than bringing this cake by." Bailey pulled a nearby chair in her direction, shifting into it.

Aaron was hypnotized by the clear violet hue of her eyes staring directly into his.

"Is there someone bothering you down at Slick Willies? I've seen some pretty rough characters cluttering the tables around there," he said, and balled his fist at his sides before he realized it.

"No...not that exactly. This is a little difficult for me to ask, but Bill Phillips told me something down at the coffeehouse this morning, and I need to know if it might be true."

Aaron's blood boiled beneath the surface. If he'd said something else inappropriate to this beautiful goddess, more than his jaw would be blackened.

"What did he tell you?" His fist clenched at his sides.

He felt anger course through him and furrowed his brows. He flexed his muscles beneath the white sleeves of his shirt.

The way she licked her lips, had him wanting her as she were a forbidden piece of candy.

"He told me I was the reason you'd hit him."

"That would be a true statement." Aaron walked over, pulling a chair next to hers.

"Why?" Bailey ran her tongue over her lips, causing Aaron to swallow hard.

"He said something that was inappropriate. I really don't want to elaborate on it. You can't pay much attention to everything Bill spits out of his mouth."

"So, I guess the other thing he mentioned probably isn't to be believed?" A note of disappointment sprang into her voice. "It's the one thing he mentioned that I'd hoped would be the truth." She drew in a breath.

Aaron rubbed the stubble on his chin. "Tell me what he said that you wished were true?" He eyed the fireman's pole directly behind her. *Damn, she would have to sit right beside the thing.*

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

"He...h-he...said, oh this is kind of embarrassing. He said that he wished you'd just fuck my eyeballs out and get it over with." Her eyes demanded his full attention with the last of her words as she bent, looking at him when his head dropped.

Aaron sucked in a slow breath, letting it out with a half-whistle. "I'm not going to lie about this. I've been attracted to you since the first time I walked into Slick Willies and heard you sing." There, it was out, and it hadn't been as hard to express his feelings as he thought it would be.

She reached over and nudged his chin up with her index finger. From the look on her face, he wasn't so sure he should have put it so brazenly. She was looking at him with her finger still on his chin, as if without its support, his head would wobble around like one of those plastic hula girls on a spring in the back of a car window.

"I'm flattered," she said when she finally spoke after what seemed an eternity. "I'm the type of person that pretty well says what's on her mind, so I'm not going to be shy here. I've lusted over you night after night, and I think it's past time we do something about it. Why should two people who feel such a strong sexual attraction deny themselves?"

Aaron couldn't believe what he was hearing. "I can't see any reason not to." He pulled her hand gently from his face, turned it over and lightly kissed her palm.

* * * * *

Sparks flew through Bailey like an electrical jolt from the touch of his searing lips. Her stomach knotted, and her clit ached to be touched by those lips. She pulled her hand away and stood. The mere touch of his mouth had jolted her unlike anything she'd ever experienced, and she needed a moment to catch her breath and recover from it.

Crossing her arms over her breasts reminded her how her nipples had hardened, begging to be caressed by this man's hands. She looked around the fire hall, studying the stark concrete block walls and equipment. "So, where are all the fire trucks?"

Mia Romano

Aaron walked over to stand by her side. "There out on a call putting out a few flames, or at least trying to prevent them from igniting. I guess you hadn't heard the news on the radio." The warmth of his smile lit up his face.

"She gave him a wicked smile. "I think there is a flame standing right here that needs to be extinguished." She leaned into him, running her hand along his chest, noting the firmness and warmth beneath the fabric of his shirt. "Like I said, I don't play games."

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Aaron couldn't stand it any longer. He pulled her into him, hearing the small gasp that escaped that sensual mouth of hers, feeling the round fullness of her breasts pressing against him begging to be set free of their binding. His lips meshed with Baileys, lightly at first, then with more demand as she parted her lips, allowing his tongue to explore the taste of her.

She moaned softly, and her hands explored his back, moving down to cup the hardness of his hips and his ass. When she pulled him closer, he knew she had to feel the evident desire press into her with overwhelming need. How could she not?

Unable to pull back, Aaron was drawn to her by a strong magnetic-like force. Never had he felt such desire and heat in his groin as he did for this woman. His hand roamed over her backside, under the loose-cropped shirt. Everyplace he touched felt scorching hot with desire.

She pulled from his kiss. "Take me," she whispered against his neck.

There was nothing more he wanted to do than to take this dark-haired beauty to one of the bunks upstairs. But old fears of failing to perform to a woman's expectations gripped his throat. "I don't want to disappoint you." He pulled away to gaze into her eyes sparking with passion.

He gripped her arms gently. "Are you sure this is what you want, Bailey? I don't want any regrets for *either* of us afterwards. I don't know

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

what I possibly have to offer you."

She gave him a look that said she thought he was insane, and couldn't he see how much she wanted him. Had one hot passionate kiss made her pussy as wet as he hoped? Had it made her so sure of wanting to sleep with him?

She pulled his hand from her arm, forcing it to run down her side, around her stomach and finally force his fingers to trickle down her inner thigh to the warm triangle between her legs. "What do *you* think?" She guided his hand back and forth slowly between the crotch area of her jeans.

Aaron leaned his head back, his thoughts drowning in a pool of unsatisfied craving. He couldn't speak, but instead pulled his hand away from her guidance, and unsnapped the clasp of her jeans to bury his fingers inside the supple folds of her labia.

She shuddered at his touch, nearly climaxing in his hand.

"Does that feel like a disappointed gal?" she said breathlessly, and reached for the fly of his jeans. "I think you are more than able to satisfy my every craving from what I'm feeling." She gently tugged at the zipper.

All reasoning flew out the door. He was too far gone to stop things, even if he'd wanted to. Damn, he didn't have a condom. Of all freakin' times not to have the proper equipment to do the job, here it was. He'd never been one to carry a condom in his wallet. Maybe it was a leftover habit from being married and not needing to do such a thing. He had to tell her before things went any further.

"Um...I don't have a condom. This could be a real problem."

"Not if we improvise. There's more than one way to take care of things." She arched her brow and licked her lips.

"Yeah, I guess you're right." He leaned into her, and pulled her lips to his.

Bailey was running her hand along the length of his cock now that she'd managed to free it from its prison of denim. She moved her mouth from his to slowly tease his neck, and then lifted his shirt, continuing the slow, pleasurable torture down his chest.

The tip of her tongue flicked back and forth on the way down. He

Mia Romano

held tight to her hair, groaning with pleasure and need. When she took him in her mouth, cupping his sac in her hand, he lost it immediately. Every shudder of his body as he thrust deeper in her mouth was stronger than the last. With her free hand she rubbed her clit, and climaxed with him while screaming out his name, unashamed of touching herself in front of him.

She pulled away and gently collapsed on the cold concrete floor, pulling him down with her. The hard coolness of it felt calming against his naked and heated skin. Never had a woman been so giving—so perfected with her touch like Bailey had just been. This was a woman who wasn't inhibited about her sexuality, and it was a bigger turn-on than even his favorite fantasy of her.

He reached out for her, and whispered, "Come upstairs, I'm not done with you yet." He wanted to please her the way she'd just done for him, and so much more.

Bailey smiled, going willingly as he led her up the steps. "Aaron, are you sure no one will be here soon, it's been nearly an hour since I got here. I don't want to get you into any more trouble. It seems I've got you in hot water already without even realizing it."

He stopped midway up the stairs. "And I'd hit Bill all over again if he ever said anything else. You are the first woman I've ever met that I'd risk every breath in my body for." He bent to kiss her, pinning her to the wall on the narrow stairwell. "I made it a rule several years ago that I wouldn't sleep with a woman unless I had genuine feelings for her. I've been celibate for a long time—until you."

He pulled away, taking her to bed before she could respond to the comment. The last thing he wanted to do was make her feel uncomfortable. He undressed her slowly while telling her in soft, loving tones that she was the most beautiful woman he'd ever encountered.

"I want you to know that I think you are a very special and sensual woman." He whispered while placing her on the small cot. "Nothing would please me more than to satisfy you for hours over and over again."

From the sound of her moaning his name, he hoped he had succeeded. The look in her eyes told him that she had felt some of the

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

passion that he had when he'd pulled her into him, lapping up every drop of her sweetness.

But would she feel the same tomorrow?

Mia Romano

Chapter Four

She wondered if he'd be at his usual table tonight. And if so, would there be a different tension besides the sexual tension of before? She wasn't used to being showered with compliments like he'd given her. Yet something in her made her want to trust the things Aaron had spoken.

Trust—it was something she struggled with frequently.

Millie Darnell was tending bar when Bailey went in to set up for the evening. Millie was one of the few friends Bailey had made since she'd arrived in Nashville six months ago.

"Well, don't you look extra spiffy tonight?" Mille let out a whistle and placed another beer mug on the shelf. "Want to tell me what's gotten into you? From the glow on your face, I'd venture to say it was a man. And a real special one at that," she added, drying her hands on her apron.

"Come on, Millie, you know I don't give away my secrets." Bailey grabbed the cold mug of beer that Mille shoved across the bar.

"This one's on the house." Her friend placed five dollars in the cash drawer.

"Now that's scary. Since when has anything ever been on the house around here?" Bailey took a satisfying drink.

"Since I'm going to have to bribe it out of you. Now come on, give me some info here." She motioned with her hands. "I ain't got all night ya know. Bet it has something to do with that handsome specimen that sits at the back table. That would be my guess."

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

Bailey ran her finger around the rim of the frosty mug, concentrating on its contents. "Perhaps it is."

"Well, it's about damn time." Millie swiped a water ring from the bar top. "I've been watchin' you two makin' goo-goo eyes at each other for months. Y'all have been killin' me. I was getting worried you had blind folders on. Any woman who wouldn't grab a hold of that calendar man needs their head examined."

"I didn't say for sure that it was him," Bailey teased, watching Millie tighten her apron and adjust it around her voluptuous boobs. "I gotta go set up the stage." She set her empty mug down. "Thanks for the drink. I'll catch you after the show."

"If he doesn't catch you first you'll see me." Millie shook her head and smiled.

* * * * *

Aaron had caught hell from the crews upon their return. He hadn't even been thinking about food when Bailey left the station the other night. He'd taken the cake she'd made and locked it in his truck to take home and enjoy every bite. Maybe he'd been selfish in keeping all of it for himself, but there wasn't *anything* about Bailey Carson he was willing to share. Right down to the skimpy pair of her panties he'd found after she'd left. He'd rubbed the lacy fabric between his fingers, and took them to store safely in the dash of his pick up. They were still there, and he liked having the scent of her lingering around with him.

What the hell was he thinking? Here he was after one night of powerhouse sex, and he was being possessive of her. Thinking crazy thoughts about her warming his bed five years down the road in the new house he was building. The one that was going up for sale, he reminded himself.

Tonight he'd have to face her down at Slick Willies. He worried she'd react differently now. Maybe she regretted what had taken place. There was only one way to find out—sit his butt in the chair at the back table, and hope he didn't make a fool of himself drooling in his bourbon.

Mia Romano

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Fifteen minutes before she was due on stage, Bailey went to tune her guitar, only to have one of the strings break. She usually kept some extras lying around, but tonight when she pulled the drawer open in the small dressing room, she found nothing but dust in the corners and a bobby pin or two. Now she was going to have to run out to the car and get one out of her dash.

She yelled down the hall to one of the band members. "I'll be right back, Steve. I have to run out to my car for a minute. Go ahead and start playing something for a few seconds until I can fix my guitar. You know how restless the crowd gets if they don't have their music."

"Will do." Steve tapped one of his drummer's sticks on the wall.

She'd driven to work tonight instead of walking, planning to head over to Millie's afterwards to help wallpaper a bedroom. Millie's promise of chips and salsa along with a few beers after they finished the work had her mouth watering already.

When she approached her beat-up station wagon she felt as if someone was watching her. Ever since the domestic dispute in her apartment building, she'd been walking around on egg shells for some reason.

The sound of a twig snapped someplace close behind her. She jumped, turning around to see Bill Phillips standing so close their shadows flooded together as if it were one darkened spot on the asphalt.

"Well, well, if it isn't our little Clair, Queen of Slick Willies." Bill shifted to the left a little.

The breeze sifted the scent of alcohol coming from his body in her direction.

"Look, Bill...um...I don't know what you're trying to accomplish, but I think you've already proven whatever point you were trying to make the other day."

"That may be true, but I think you and I have other things to talk about." He stepped directly in front of her car door. "You know your

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

daddy was real disappointed when you just loaded up your car and took off to Nashville. He had such high hopes of you putting that interior design degree to good use. Said he'd paid a fortune for you to go to college, then you threw it all away. He called me and told me to be on the look out for you. Now, you can stand here and continue to be Bailey Carson, wanna-be superstar, but we both know better."

"If you don't move and let me in my car, I'm going to—"

Those were the last words that escaped Bailey's lips. Within seconds, Bill grabbed her, placing his hand over her mouth to prevent her from screaming. He pulled her over to his truck parked alongside her car, unlocked the door and attempted to shove her inside.

She struggled, catching her foot on the outside step runner, pushing against him with every ounce of strength in her body. But Bill was fast, and he was still in the same physical condition as he'd been in high school, making it easy to release her foot and grab a pair of handcuffs from the front seat in the process. Her wrists were bound within seconds, with Bill bragging at his efforts.

"I'm real fast with my hands," he said with a wicked grin. With a lightning-fast reflex, he had her completely bound, forcing her inside the cab of the truck. "I promised your daddy I'd find you and bring you back home, and that's just what I intend to do," he said a little breathlessly.

"You'll never get away with this." Bailey glared in his direction, struggling to loosen the shackles, banging her body against the passenger door in an attempt to pry it open to no avail.

"Watch me." Bill hopped in, and threw the truck in reverse. "Don't worry, I'm not going to hurt ya. Just try and relax. We've got a long ride ahead of us. We might even have some fun if you'll just relax a little. Might even be like old times."

"You're crazy!" Bailey screamed. "What did my father do, offer you a free ride to heaven or something? My father can't control me anymore. I'm far past being under age and under his strict rules. I can do whatever I please, whenever I please, and with *whom* I please."

Bill let out a laugh, reached down and grabbed his cock through the thin fabric of his sweat pants. "With *whom* I'd certainly say so. Guess

Mia Romano

Aaron forgot about the security camera downstairs in the fire hall the other night. You got a real talented mouth there, sugar.” He continued to rub himself. “Of course, I guess Aaron didn’t realize the camera had been fixed while he was out on probation. How would he know or expect it to be working? The thing was broken for well over a year.”

“You are a sick man, Bill Phillips.” Bailey’s lip quivered, and she turned her head to stare out into the solid darkness of the deserted road.

She could hear his breathing becoming heavy, and there wasn’t any question as to why. She was going to be sick any minute.

“Look at me, Bailey. I got something over here I know you’re gonna like a whole lot better than Aaron Montana’s.” He laughed and pulled to the shoulder of the empty back road.

Bailey refused to turn her head. She had to be strong and hold her ground. Maybe she could jar the door with the force of her body if she tried hard enough. Just as she tried reaching the door latch with her bound hands, Bill pulled her toward him the second she’d clasped her hand around it.

“I wouldn’t do that if I were you.” He forced her to turn and look at him, then shoved her face down to his crotch. “Come on baby, do me.” He plunged his cock in the direction of her mouth. “You know you like it rough. If you’ll be a real good girl, maybe I’ll buy you some dinner in a couple of hours.”

That’s when Bailey gathered all the strength within her. Anger had her adrenaline pumping full blast. Her heart beat with fear. She wasn’t about to let this devil of a man force her to do anything against her will. Her wrists might be bound, but her brain and will to survive *weren’t*.

She took her bound arms and swung with all her might, hoping like hell the metal from the handcuffs cracked his skull. She knocked him out cold with the harsh blow and tumbled out the driver’s side, never to look back. She’d given him a substantial blow to his head from the terrible cracking sound she’d heard when she hit him. For all she knew she might have caused a severe concussion during the struggle. She wasn’t a violent person by nature but this had been an exception, and she’d had no choice but self-defense in the matter.

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

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Aaron sat at the back table, glancing at his watch. Damn it, where was she? Beads of sweat popped from his brow. Maybe she'd quit and packed up, moving on to someplace else to sing. That had to be it. She'd thought things over and couldn't face him. He rubbed his hands over his face with feelings of a headache coming on. Not only did he have a headache, but worse—heartache. Here he'd gone and screwed things up all over again.

He even felt responsible for Bill Phillips being fired yesterday. Apparently Bill had been going against some rules in the fire departments code of ethics. Yet Aaron had lucked out and was still with the fire department. He felt guilty over it even though the two of them hadn't gotten along since their scuffle. None of the crewmembers really knew what happened, but there were some pretty ugly rumors flying around down at the station.

Something had snapped in Bill the day they'd carried Marla Simpson's body out on the stretcher during that domestic call. Bill had been with the fire department for three years, had even won several awards for bravery. Someone had told Aaron that he'd become a firefighter because he'd lost a sister in a house fire. So what had happened to make a top fireman the station valued go bad?

He motioned for the waitress and ordered bourbon straight up, downing it as soon as she placed it on the table, enjoying the harsh burn in his throat.

Someone jumped on stage and grabbed the microphone. "I'm sorry folks. There's been a slight delay in getting Ms. Carson up on stage tonight. In the meantime, we have a couple demo's of her songs were going to play for you."

Something was terribly wrong. Aaron felt it in his gut. The announcer hadn't looked very convincing about what he'd been saying. Now what was he going to do about it? Would he just sit back and wait, hoping the dark-haired angel would bounce in any second? Or was he

Mia Romano

going to try and find out the truth?

He shoved himself from the table, and headed to the bar. Surely one of the co-workers would know what was really going on. Of course, getting them to tell him was another matter. What made him think they would give someone who was just a local patron any information?

"Mr. Montana," the woman behind the bar said, meeting him halfway down the aisle with a worried look creasing her forehead. "Please, I need your help. Something has happened to Bailey," she whispered, motioning him to a quiet corner. "She's a friend of mine, and she was here a few minutes ago getting ready for her performance. I just went back to her dressing room and the only thing there is her guitar. I know Bailey; she wouldn't go anyplace without that guitar of hers."

Panic thudded in Aaron's heart. "Do you have any idea if she would have stepped out for just a minute?" The only thing on his mind was trying to find her.

"Steve, our drummer, said he saw her go out to the parking lot about thirty minutes ago. She never came back in, according to him. He just figured she'd left something she needed out in the car for the show tonight." Millie rang her hands in her apron. "This is so unlike her."

"Where's her car?" Aaron scrubbed a hand through his hair. "I'll go check it out."

Millie pulled the apron over her head, tossing it on the bar. "I'll go with you." She pulled her hand through the mass of dark curls on her head. "There was some creep asking about what time she performed earlier. I didn't think much about it at the time, but noticed he was a little rough looking. You know, had a black eye and kind of scruffy clothes on. He was downing Tequila shots like they were water."

Aaron saw blood red. "I think I know who it was."

"There's her car, right over there." Millie pointed to the station wagon with chipped red paint. "Look, her keys are hanging out of the lock on the driver's door!"

That wasn't the only thing dangling at the moment. Aaron's heart was barley beating, hanging by a thread that would snap any second. He sucked in a breath and held it. Dammit, he loved her. It had taken the

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

possibility of never seeing her again for him to realize it. He was such a fool for waiting so long to approach her. "Call 911 — hurry!" He shouted, finally remembering to breathe. "I think Bailey's in some serious trouble."

Aaron lost track of everything around him after that. Millie was practically crying as she punched in 911, and handed him her cell phone. "Here, I...I can't speak right now, I'm too upset. Tell them they have to *find* her."

* * * * *

Three weeks had passed since the incident. The only news they'd received was that Bill's truck had been found abandoned twenty miles outside of Nashville. No one had been in the vehicle when they'd tracked it down. A thorough search of the cab had given them one small clue that Bailey had been abducted and been in the truck cab. They'd found a couple of tortoise shell guitar picks on the floorboard. Her friend, Millie, had confirmed that they belonged to Bailey. She'd bought them herself for Bailey as a birthday gift. She'd ordered them special from Brazil, so it wasn't likely anyone else would have some like them.

The police weren't able to get a good fingerprint off of them to make sure, but somehow they knew Bailey had lost them there.

Aaron wondered if they weren't withholding some type of evidence that hadn't been released to the public. Sometimes investigations like these could go on for years. Most times the case only closed when they tragically found the abducted persons' body.

Aaron shuddered at the thought, pounding another nail in the wooden slat of the deck. He'd poured his heart and soul into the house since that unforgettable night. Maybe if he pounded hard enough, worked until the sweat drenched every fiber of clothing on his body, he'd be able to survive without her. He could sweat away the pain until only numbness remained.

It was early October, normally his favorite time of the year, but he didn't see any of the beauty or color in the mountains surrounding the house nearing completion. He only saw the way Bailey's face had looked

Mia Romano

the last time he'd seen her. It had been so soft and beautiful.

Two more weeks went by, and Aaron contacted a realtor, watching them push the For Sale sign into the front yard. He'd quit the fire department to work full-time on the house. Now he'd sell it, and perhaps he'd move someplace else. With luck, he would outrun the memories.

He had chosen his friend Gable Smith to list the house. Gable could move property faster than a fruit fly could multiply.

Gable brushed his hands off, looking around the property. "I don't know Aaron, you sure you want to sell this beauty? I mean, look at the view you have around this place."

"I have no use for it." Aaron picked up a small rock, slinging it into the large pond. "This house was meant for a family. You know, a well-stocked pond for a father and son to fish in. A house meant for a mother to cook in, and laugh in, with her children. I'll never have any of those things. It would be selfish of me to keep it for myself."

Gable let out a low whistle and placed his hands on his hips. "All right then, if you're sure about this I'll start the advertising. I'm confident it won't be on the market long." He headed to his BMW and opened the driver's door. "You're one hundred percent sure about this?" He arched his brow.

Aaron rubbed his hands down the sides of his jaw. "One hundred and fifty percent."

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

Chapter Five

"I'll take it, if the builder will put one thing in the kitchen." Bailey was standing inside the living room. After nearly two months, she was finally feeling more like herself again. She'd hidden in her rundown apartment for weeks after her trauma. She'd asked the police to keep quiet about her return to town. She'd let Millie and the others know when she was ready.

Maybe that was being selfish, but she needed to get her head together first—deal with what had happened. She knew if Millie and the others found out she was safe, there would be a constant trail of well-wishers at her door. Bailey was the type of person that wouldn't stay down in the dumps for long.

It was her nature to pull herself back up. That very nature had given her the drive to succeed in what she'd set out to—like get a multi-million dollar record contract with Spin City Recording Studio. She was still in shock over it.

The timing couldn't have been better. Life was nearly perfect, her luck had finally changed, and she was cooperating with the local law enforcement, willing to press charges against Bill Phillips once they found him.

The captain of the police force had suggested she move to a different area of Nashville and change vehicles if she could possibly afford to do so. Well, now she could, and intended to find a place that gave her a feeling of peace and security.

Mia Romano

"I don't know if the builder will agree to that or not, but I'll try." The realtor was making some notes in his palm pilot. "I must say this is a very unusual request." Sam Kline gave her a smile. "Remember, I'm not the agent with this realty company. We're just in it because we belong to the multiple listing services."

Bailey let out a laugh. "You know these things are all the rage in Hollywood. I bet if you checked ten out of every fifteen houses there, you'd find a stripper's pole in nine of them. It's the latest rage in exercise."

* * * * *

Aaron sat down in the chair opposite Gable's at Innovation Reality. "Come on, you've got to be *kidding* me. A stripper's pole? What kind of woman wants to buy this house anyway?"

"Aaron." Gable cleared his throat, "I know you had a certain vision of the type of buyer for your house, but..."

"Your damn right I do. I've poured everything I've got into that house. And now you're telling me some *stripper* wants to buy it? She must pull in some pretty big tips from her patrons."

"Do you want to sell the house or not?" Gable tossed an ink pen across the cherry desk. "Her money is just as green as the next guys."

"Who is this woman anyway—what's her name?" Aaron stood, shoving his hands in the front pocket of his tight jeans.

"I can't reveal the buyer yet. Unless you agree to this one condition, she won't sign the contract. The choice is certainly up to you, Aaron. There are plenty of other buyers out there."

"Okay, I'll do it. But it's only because I want to put closure to this whole thing. *Now* will you tell me who the buyer is?"

"She wants to inspect the work before she signs the contract. I know your work, and it's top-of-the-line. I'm sure she'll be pleased when you finish installing the pole. Keep in mind she is offering full-price here."

* * * * *

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

Aaron leaned his head against the new pole he'd just finished installing in the kitchen. It was a pole which reminded him far too much of his fantasy of Bailey, twisting her supple body around the larger version in the firehouse. The cool metal did nothing to ease his heartache. Of all things that a potential buyer would want, it would have had to be *this*.

He picked up his tools, and slammed them in the toolbox. He had to get away from the flood of memories that kitchen reminded him of.

Punching Gable's number into his cell phone, he waited for him to answer. The project was complete, and he wanted to walk out the door of the house, never looking back or entering it again.

Gable answered on the third ring. "Hey there Aaron, saw your number pop up on the caller ID. I hope you're calling to tell me we're ready to finalize a contract."

"Tell your buyer I've completed installing that damn pole in the kitchen. She's free to inspect it to her heart's content." The bitterness filtered through his voice, although he'd tried to hide it.

"Wonderful, I'll give her a call and see if she can meet me out there this afternoon. I know she'll be anxious to sign the contract. She's paying cash, so there's no chance of this thing not going through."

"Well, tell her it's ready to move into as soon as we can schedule the closing. And Gable...I'd rather just do it by FedEx if we could. I don't think I want to look at this woman across the closing table."

"Whatever you say, Bud, talk to you soon." Gable disconnected.

* * * * *

"That should do it, Ms. Baker, or do you prefer to be called Bailey?" Gable reached to shake her hand.

"Bailey...please." She smiled, feeling the firmness of his handshake. She really needed to think about legally changing her name to Bailey Carson. Every time she had to sign a legal document, bad memories of her life in Ohio surfaced like slimy foam on a tainted riverbank.

Mia Romano

"Isn't it kind of strange to do the closing by FedEx overnight mailing? The owner isn't hiding something, is he?"

"FedEx closings are becoming more common these days," Gable reassured her. "It seems that life is so hectic; people rely on modern technology for nearly everything. The house comes with a full home warranty, and I've done my homework, there aren't any liens for building materials or anything on it. You will have a free and clear deed."

Bailey glanced at her copy of the contract again. She'd been so excited about finding what she referred to as her *perfect paradise* that she hadn't paid attention to the name of the seller on any of the documents. She'd happily scribbled away with the thought of owning such a beautiful home coming closer with each paper that was shoved in front of her. She hoped she hadn't made too hasty of a decision.

Her heart stopped when she took note of the seller—Aaron Montana. She trembled, thinking of the man who had briefly touched her life with such passion and made her heart long for his touch. But no, it couldn't be the same man, but how many Aaron Montana's could there be in this town?

"Ms. Carson, are you all right?" Gable guided her to sit back down in the chair. "Can I bring you a glass of water or something?"

"No...I'm fine, thank you. But tell Mr. Montana that I won't close the deal via FedEx. I'll expect to see him sitting across from me at the closing table." *And in my bed.* She stood, trying to regain her composure and get her emotions in check. "You can reach me on my cell phone."

"You're the buyer. I'll pass the information on to Mr. Montana, Bailey. We want to keep you happy." Gable gave her a smile.

* * * * *

"She's refusing to close by FedEx? Unbelievable." Aaron paced back and forth in his apartment. "What's this woman's freaking deal anyway? I've already done what she wanted me to. Who does she think she is anyway—the Queen?"

"Look, Aaron, all I know is after she signed the contract she seemed

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

really upset and was acting like she wanted to back out of the deal. Can't you just do this one tiny favor and agree to a person-to-person closing? Man, if this sale doesn't go through, my wife's gonna be real disappointed come Christmas. She's expecting a mink coat this year. Let alone her withholding my getting any pussy for a week. I'm going to fax all the paperwork over just as soon as we hang up. Just think about it and give me a call after you've looked over the documents."

"Well I wouldn't want you to be deprived." Aaron laughed. "Send them my way and I'll give you a call back."

Fifteen minutes later, the fax machine was humming in Aaron's small workspace of his bedroom. He waited until the entire racket stopped before going in to pull the paper out of the printer.

Sitting down at the small desk, he shuffled them into a neat stack, and started browsing the documents. When he saw the buyer's name, he shook his head and took another look. "Clair Baker? No...no way in hell can it be Bailey," he shouted with disbelief.

Now what was he going to do? Excitement and confusion rattled through his brain. If Bailey was safe and in town, certainly he would have found out about it—unless...she didn't want him to know...didn't want to see him. Hell, he wasn't even sure Bill Phillips knew what he'd been talking about when he said Bailey was really this Clair Baker woman. He was probably jumping to conclusions and wishful thinking.

Would Bailey be the type to have a stripper pole put in the kitchen? No...or he didn't *think* she would. But the thought and hope of it had him bouncing around the room with more enthusiasm than he'd had in weeks.

His fantasies came alive in full-blown color. Anxious, he punched Gable's number while tapping his foot impatiently with each ring of the phone. "Come on...answer the phone, Gable!" Aaron's heartbeat accelerated. The voice mail kicked in, so he left a brief message. "Gable, okay. I'll be at the closing. And you need to call me ASAP. I think I know this woman."

* * * * *

Mia Romano

Aaron was watching Bailey run her hand along the shiny slickness of the stripper pole in her kitchen. Five hours before she'd sat across from him at the table and swore she never intended to let go of him.

And she hadn't, not since he'd kissed her silly out in the parking lot of the real estate office after she'd explained everything. Now he was leaning against the wall among a few boxes she'd carried over in the trunk of her car, watching every sexy move the woman made.

"So, you really did have that pole put in for exercise, huh?" He was grinning from ear to ear.

"That was my first intention, but...um...now that I have you here, maybe I'll find a better use for it." She did a seductive little twist around it.

Oh, man, could he take it? Finally, his fantasy was becoming a reality. He clapped his hands slowly, letting out a wolf whistle, and reached in his pocket for a twenty, holding it in the air. "Yeah baby, that's what I like," he teased.

"And there is going to be plenty more of what you like in a little while." Bailey undid the buttons of her shirt. Then she shimmied out of her pants and did another twist around the pole. "I take request, you know." She licked her lips.

He pushed away from the wall and moved into her, pinning her to the pole. "Well, I most certainly have a request...a very special one." He cleared his throat and meshed his body with hers. "Bailey, do you think you'd ever be interested in selling me this house back?"

"What?" She slid sideways, slipping under his arms.

"You heard me," he said, grinning like a goon. "I'm willing to pay you top dollar, and as an added benefit, you can stay here as long as you like. What I'm trying to say is...will you marry me, Bailey?"

She stood in the middle of the kitchen stunned, wearing nothing but her bra and panties. When she turned to look at him, he swore he saw a tear staining her cheek. "Come over here and fuck me, and I'll give you an answer, baby."

"Oh, shit," he stuttered, wondering if that was a yes to his question. "You aren't going to believe this, but...well, I don't have a condom."

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

Again."

She looked at him with huge violet eyes filled with passion, and then looked out the kitchen window at the pond, thinking how it would be to see Aaron and a little boy fishing there. "I don't think we need to worry about one." She finally said. "We'll need to work on filling up these rooms with a few children.

"I'll take that as a yes." He lifted her off her feet and carried her to the bedroom. "I have lots of fishing to do." He smiled.

"Then I suggest you pull out your best fishing pole. I bet I can locate it." She grabbed his cock and smiled up at him.

The End

Mia Romano

Author Bio

Mia Romano wrote her first story at the tender age of six. She was promptly taken out in the school hallway, where her first grade teacher paddled her for that particular story. Today she's still writing stories, but avoids the hallway, unless there is a tornado warning in her part of Alabama.

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

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Lonely Places by A.L. Debran © 2006

Chapter One

Wrapped in a worn and soiled wool blanket, she rode steadily into the night. She trusted the sorrel gelding to take her away from Greeley and into the obscurity of the vast eastern Colorado plains. The roan packhorse followed doggedly in their wake.

Fading in and out of twilight consciousness with pain and bone-weary exhaustion, thoughts of the Man troubled her foggy mind. *Is he dead? Is he still coming? Why didn't I make sure he was dead when I had the chance? I shot him with his own pistol. Surely, he's dead.*

The cool night breeze ceased with the welcome daylight warmth that touched her face. Realizing the gentle sway of her ride had ceased, she opened her eyes to discover the horses standing at the edge of a river, drinking deeply. With a twinge of guilt, she knew she'd pushed the horses too hard. But getting as far away from the Man as fast as possible had been her first priority.

Turning her head to scan the area for shelter, she caught her breath at the sharp pain. She touched her neck and winced. Her wound needed cleaning and suturing, as did the one on her leg. Nudging the sorrel with her heels, they crossed the river.

Mia Romano

It took all her energy to tether the horses, where they could reach water and graze, and to remove the saddle and packs. She pampered her horses when she could. Her survival depended upon their well-being. This would be a good place to stop for the day. She needed to limit her travel to the protective cover of night. Slumping to the ground beside her packs, she wished for coffee and sleep.

Sensitive to the moods of her horses, she watched them, trusting them to warn her if anyone approached. Yellow-billed magpies squawked in the branches above her and hopped on the ground nearby, ready to snatch away any tidbit of food she might neglect. A woodpecker hammered away somewhere downstream. Feeling safe enough for the time being, but keeping her shotgun and revolver close at hand, she forced herself to build a small fire to heat water for coffee and for cleaning her wounds.

From a well-worn leather Gladstone bag, she took out a small cracked mirror and a pouch of suturing tools. Settling herself on the ground, she took what she needed from the pouch and dropped the items into the heating water. *Hmm. I need something to prop this mirror where I can see in it.* She spied a short piece of driftwood within easy reach and laid it across the seat of her saddle. Leaning the mirror against the stick, she still had to hunch over and cock her head awkwardly to see the cut on her neck. Quickly dipping her fingers into the hot water, she snatched the needle and suturing thread. Then with a deep breath, gritted teeth, and determination, she tied the first of many small sutures.

Thirty minutes later, cursing and sweating from the pain, she washed the blood from the wounds one last time. With no binding cloth available, she tore the sleeves from her flannel shirt and wrapped both wounds. That done, she rested on the blanket, nauseous and shaking.

Coffee. Need something warm to settle my stomach. She poured the dark brew into a tin cup, the aroma making her mouth water, then leaned against her saddle. It was hot and tasted good, but swallowing was difficult. It also took the edge off her cold, empty loneliness.

She watched her horses while sunlight seeped into her battered body, relaxing her. Another cup of coffee wandered into her memory.

Burnin' Down Nash Vegas

How long had it been? A year and a half? Two years? Though she'd lost track of the time, she could still hear his kind, soft voice as they visited in the lobby of a Chicago hotel while waiting out a blizzard.

She laid her head back, thinking of the green-eyed man she'd known for two snowbound days. She wondered if he was still in London studying law, or back home with his family. *Family*. She savored the word in her mind. He had family and she was alone. She blinked back tears.

The worst part wasn't that she'd never see him again. It wasn't even that they didn't know each other's names. The worst was that they'd fallen in love. He'd asked her to go with him, marry him. They'd both wanted that, but she hadn't gone, and now she'd never know if she'd made a mistake. All she had of him as remembrance was the silver cuff link he'd lost.