



There's only one man she needs to believe in. Him.

*Unbelievable, Book 1*

When it comes to her love life, the name of Aubrey Mathison's coffee shop says it all: "Bean There, Done That". There's only one harmless man in her life right now—the homeless one parked outside the shop. Except the crazy things he says keep coming true.

She has to laugh at "You'll meet your soul mate today", though. Divorce taught her that men as gorgeous as sexy police chief Price Delacroix are not to be trusted. She's totally up for a one-night stand, but more than that? No, thanks.

Price bears his own scars from the past, but he knows instantly that Aubrey is his. How to convince her he wants more than to be her personal jungle gym? Cut her off. That means no more mattress gymnastics—until she starts seeing things his way.

Aubrey is just as determined Price's campaign to wear down her resistance is going to fail, no matter how wickedly determined he is. Until her resident prophet spouts a new prediction: her soul mate's life is in danger...

Warning: A sexy cop who doesn't take no for an answer, a sassy heroine who knows the power of a good striptease, spankings, anal, and enough variety in hot sexual positions to make your toes curl. Oh, and a slightly crazy guardian angel.

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# If You Believe

*Crystal Jordan*

## Dedication

*For Beth, who made me do it.*

## Chapter One

*Cedarville, Oregon*

“The end is near!” the grubby man shouted at Aubrey as she walked past. He waved a big sign that said the same thing in fire engine red letters.

The end of what though? The world? America? Poverty? The bad song blasting out of his boom box? She was hoping for that last one as she dumped some change into the rusted coffee can next to him.

“Hi, Jericho.” She gave him a wide berth. The homeless guy was bat-shit crazy, but harmless, and she’d been forking whatever change she had in her pockets into his can for a couple of months. Which she’d done every day since he’d

parked his unwashed self on the park bench across from her coffee shop Bean There, Done That.

“Hey, Aubrey!” Jericho gave her a gap-tooth grin before he sobered abruptly, his eyes taking on a weird intensity.

“Beware of fire today.”

She blinked at him, chills crawling over her skin at the weird statement. Opening her mouth to ask what the hell he was babbling about, she stopped. He’d already started humming along with the radio. Yep, the man was certifiable.

“Yeah, okay. Thanks, Jericho.” She waved as she jogged across the street through the early morning fog.

A wave of deep satisfaction rolled through her when she approached the front of her shop. It’d been open for over three years and business was booming. She’d moved to Cedarville from Portland after her divorce was final because she needed a change of pace, a change of *place*. She’d caught her ex screwing one of the waitresses at the restaurant they’d owned, so she’d screwed him in the divorce settlement. Was she bitter? Hell, yes. Almost eight years as Mrs. Scott Roberts had gotten her nothing except a broken heart and broken dreams.

Scott had cured her of her girlish longings for love and commitment. Now she kept it light and fun with the men she dated. She’d found it was easier for everyone that way. No one got hurt, especially not her.

Unlocking the side entrance, she turned off the security system and went through the routine of opening up the shop. After the chaos and rush of being the head pastry chef at a *chichi* restaurant in Portland, Bean There, Done That was nirvana. The mornings were her alone time, when the whole world came down to this Zen place with just her, the ovens, and the smell of baking pastries and fresh brewed coffee.

Susan would be in soon to help Aubrey with the morning rush, but this time was all Aubrey’s. The time flew by and before she knew it, Susan’s massive combat boots were tromping into the kitchen. Glancing up, Aubrey stifled a snort. Over the boots, Susan wore a lacy black Victorian style dress. “Heya, Aubrey.”

The only dress code for employees was that they wear a black outfit with the black and green Bean There, Done That apron over it. Susan liked to take the uniform to the next level. “Morning.”

The younger woman checked the daily menu Aubrey had written on the chalkboard out front and then took the chairs off the tables to set up for the day. Thirty minutes until they opened. They worked in companionable silence. One of the reasons she had Susan on the morning shift was that she didn’t chatter.

Wiping a last bit of flour off her hands, Aubrey turned to Susan before walking into the back room. “I’ll grab the last batch of lemon cakes out of the oven if you watch the glaze on the stove.”

“Sure thing, boss lady.” Susan’s braids bobbed when she nodded.

Just as Aubrey flipped off the ovens and pulled out the hot pans a shriek came from the front. Her heart seized in terror before it leaped into a gallop. Slapping the pans onto the cooling racks, she raced for the other room. Flames danced across the stovetop, and Susan lay in a crumpled heap on the floor. “Susan!”

A customer wandered in the door, and Aubrey rounded on him like a madwoman. “Do you have a cell phone?”

He nodded, staring blankly from her to the fire. “Then go outside *and call 911*.”

Reality seemed to hit him. He jerked his cell out of his pocket, spun and bolted for the door. She turned back to Susan.

“Oh. God.” *OhGodOhGodOhGod*. Sweat ran in rivulets down Aubrey’s face, her heart pounding so hard she thought it might explode.

The fire hit a dishtowel that had flopped onto the floor near Susan. No time to grab the fire extinguisher. Dropping to her hands and knees, Aubrey crawled as fast as she could to Susan’s side, wrapped an arm around her and slid her as

far away from the flames as possible. The heat rolled over Aubrey, drying her eyes out while every instinct inside her screamed to *run*. To escape the danger. But she couldn't leave the younger woman.

Aubrey hacked and wheezed as the smoke got thicker. Jesus, she needed to get the fire extinguisher. Staggering to her feet, she snatched the bright red canister off the wall. The smoke seemed to follow her, and when she spun she realized that the ends of her hair were on fire. Terror exploded through her and she frantically slapped the flames out, her shriek dissolving into a whistling cough as the smoke burned her throat. A sob bubbled up, but she ripped the pin out of the extinguisher and hosed the stove down with white foam. It went everywhere, all over the stove, her, the counters, her, the floor, her. Smoke boiled up while the flames slowly died out.

Whooping sounded in the air as the whole fire department, an ambulance and a police car rolled up to the front of the shop. Thank God. Tears streamed from her eyes, as much from relief and residual fear as from the acrid smoke. Her lungs burned like she'd sucked the flames down her throat. She sank to her knees beside Susan and closed her eyes. No way was she leaving Susan alone in here, even if the fire was out.

The firefighters bundled both women up and got them out, slapping an oxygen mask on Aubrey in the process. Smoke inhalation, they said. Yeah, she could believe it. She grabbed one fireman's sleeve. Fire damage and the mask made her sound like Darth Vader. "Will she be okay?"

Mason Delacroix. She knew this man. He ordered a black coffee every day at noon. He nodded down at her. "Yeah. She seems to be doing all right. Looks like she's waking up. We'll know more when they get her to Cedarville General."

Aubrey clamored into the ambulance beside Susan, ignoring the protest from one of the paramedics. What was he going to do, toss her out? They both knew she was going to have to get checked out by a doctor anyway. This way it was one trip for Susan *and* Aubrey.

Only then did it occur to her that her business was trashed. Shit on a stick. A million details bounced through her head, but she couldn't focus on one of them. Police reports, insurance claims, cleaning up the mess. God, what a mess. It was too much for her right now. Her thoughts slid away, so she closed her eyes and let herself rest. Just for a moment. Weariness dragged at her very bones, and she hung on to Susan's hand as the ambulance sped through the normally quiet streets of her little town.

"How's that?" Celia Occam, Aubrey's flamboyant best friend *cum* hairstylist, spun the chair around so she could look at herself. Today Celia wore ragged blue jeans and ropes of black pearls. Somehow she pulled it off. With style. She'd cut the scorched ends off Aubrey's long hair. Instead of the waist length, flat mahogany sheet she usually wore, Celia had layered it up to Aubrey's bra strap and thrown some highlights in. It made her look younger than thirty-four and set off the grey-blue of her eyes. She turned her head to get a peek at the back. "Nice. Very nice." "I know." Twirling the silver cape away from Aubrey's shoulders, Celia brushed a few stray hairs off her customary black shirt.

"Yeah, you've just been waiting for an excuse to do whatever you want to my hair." Aubrey's voice came out a smoky drawl. Her throat still ached a bit from the smoke, but the doctor said she would be fine in no time.

"Hell, yes, girlfriend." Celia smirked, and Aubrey rolled her eyes in return.

The bell over the door tinkled, and both Celia and Aubrey turned towards it to see who was coming in. Celia groaned and closed her eyes before offering the newcomer a glare. Aubrey bit her lip to hide a grin that might get her scalped

bald. Mason Delacroix was the bane of Celia's existence. He asked her out at least once a week. Aubrey had no idea why her friend kept turning him down. He was a firefighter, built like a Greek god, and had a Vin Diesel thing going on with his shaved head. If that wasn't enough, his green eyes always had a twinkle of wicked mischief in them. The man was beyond good looking. Hell, if he wasn't so into her best friend, *she'd* ask him out herself.

Celia claimed that she didn't want to settle down and that he was the marrying kind, but Aubrey just thought that meant she was being a pansy about it. She didn't have to let it go far enough to be serious. Shag him and get it out of her system was Aubrey's advice. Celia hadn't taken the suggestion so far.

He arched a brow and grinned at Celia. "Don't worry. I'm not here for you...this time."

Her brown eyes narrowed to slits, and Aubrey thought she saw the barest flash of jealousy on the hairstylist's face.

"Who are you here for then? And why couldn't it wait until *after* she left my salon?"

"Seeing you is the bonus, honey. I need to speak to Ms. Mathison."

Pursing her lips at him, Aubrey lifted her eyebrows. "Oh, do not put me in the middle of the little hard-to-get games you two play."

But his face fell into serious lines. "I've gone over every inch of your shop with the Fire Marshall, and we have questions about why the alarm and sprinkler system didn't go off because your building and system are up to fire code."

"Oh." She blinked, processing the abrupt change of topic. She'd been so focused on getting out of the fire that she hadn't even thought about the sprinkler system—and now she felt completely stupid for *not* thinking about it. "Shit. That was an expensive system too. What the hell happened?"

"We think it was a malfunction. Nothing looked tampered with." He nodded, total confidence radiating from his handsome face, and she finally got why everyone assumed he was a shoo-in to take over the fire department in the next few years. "However, Price wants to meet with you personally to take your report and go over the events of yesterday."

Price Delacroix was the new Chief of Police and Mason's older brother. He'd followed Mason to Cedarville a few months before. She hadn't met him yet, but the buzz around town was that he was a hotshot ex-SWAT officer from L. A. and that he was as gorgeous as his brother. Not that she gave a flying rat's ass what he looked like right now. She needed to get her livelihood back up and running. A malfunctioning fire system was a glitch she did not need—not to mention how that piece of news was going to go over with her insurance company.

A headache began to throb, and she rubbed a hand over her forehead. "All right then. You'll be in touch about this later, won't you?"

"Count on it." His broad shoulder lifted in a shrug. "I'm sorry about all of this, Aubrey."

"Thanks." She sighed, shrugging to stretch the tight muscles in her neck and arms. At least Susan was okay—her mother would pick her up and take her home later that day. All she'd had was a mild concussion after she'd tripped over her combat boots and cracked her head on the counter, spilling glaze all over the stove and starting the fire. Bean There, Done That wasn't quite as lucky as the two of them. The police had taped off Aubrey's shop until an officer could come take her statement. She was meeting him in half an hour. Apparently, that meant she was meeting with the chief himself. She winced. A part of her did *not* want to see the mess she knew would be inside. It had looked bad enough from the *outside* this morning. Her shop was the refuge she'd used to get over the heartache of

her divorce. Seeing it damaged and broken was not something she relished, especially with this extra complication Mason just threw in her lap.

“Okay, honey. I need to go take care of this. Thank you, you’re a genius and my personal hair goddess.” She smacked a kiss on Celia’s cheek and handed her enough bills to pay for the new hairdo and a big tip.

Grinning, Celia gave her a quick hug. “Take care, honey.”

“Thanks.” Aubrey tugged her purse strap over her shoulder and walked outside. Celia’s salon, Occam’s Razor, was on the opposite side of the park that made up the town square.

Aubrey jogged across the street, already fishing in her pocket for some change for Jericho. She couldn’t see him through the trees yet, but he was always there. He was as reliable as rain in the Pacific Northwest. And there he was, his scraggly hat coming into view. His boom box blasted out old ’70s rock today—a major improvement over yesterday’s ear grinding noise. He smiled when he spotted her. “Hey, Aubrey! Sorry about your shop.”

Sudden tears smarted her eyes, and she had to stare up at the sky for a minute to keep them from falling. How bad would it be in there? She swallowed and dropped the coins into his coffee can. “Mornin’, Jericho.”

“Are you all right?” Concern swam in his grey eyes, and he snatched off his hat to crumple it between his filthy hands. His hair stood up in ragged silver patches. “I didn’t mean to make you cry.”

“Don’t worry about it.” She folded her arms over her T-shirt and sniffled.

He laced his fingers together over his flat belly. “Well, I believe everything happens for a reason. There’s a logic to this happening.”

Her mouth dropped open, and for probably the first time in her life, she had no idea what to say. She sputtered for a long moment, just staring at the crazy man. “Who’s logic are we talking about?”

“The Man Upstairs of course.”

Shaking her head, she continued to stare as if he’d grown a second head. “You amaze me, Jericho. You’re sitting there on a park bench—homeless—and you’re talking about how everything is right with the world.”

“What do you believe in, Aubrey?” His silver gaze sharpened as he focused on her face. She felt pinned in place, a bug in a high school science lab.

Narrowing her eyes, she refused to feel uncomfortable. His religion was not her issue—and she didn’t have to agree with him. Besides, how many people got *everything is sunshiny because of God* speeches from hobos? It was unreal. She was having one hell of a weird couple of days. “Are you trying to convert me, Jericho?”

He chuckled. “I asked what *you* believe in. I don’t need to covert anyone. My faith is what it is.”

“Okay. Fine.” She jammed her fists down on her hips. “What’s the reason my shop caught fire?”

“That’s easy.” A contented smile washed over his face and the intense moment was gone. He whistled a little tune. His voice was just this side of dreamy when he said, “So you could meet your soul mate today.”

She rolled her eyes and spun away. Why was she debating with a nut ball? She was going to have to start questioning her own sanity. *Soul mate? Riiiiight*. She didn’t believe in soul mates. She’d given up on love a long time ago. Been there, done that. She’d named her shop that for a reason. It was her motto. Scott was the only man she’d ever imagined coming close to being a *soul mate*. And he’d made sure she didn’t have any illusions left after the divorce about how much she had lacked as a wife and life partner. Love? Soul mates? She snorted.

A big, muscular man leaned against the side of a Crown Victoria outside her shop. His gaze followed her as she left Jericho and walked over to meet him. That had to be Chief Delacroix. He looked too much like Mason to be anyone



else. In a town as small as Cedarville, she could identify everyone who lived here on sight. And this man had never been in her coffee shop. A shame too. He certainly was pretty to look at—even better looking than Mason, and that was saying something.

He looked her over, assessing her. Something sparked in his green gaze but was masked in a professional demeanor before she could decide what it was. “Mrs. Mathison?”

“It’s Ms. and call me Aubrey.” She offered her hand for him to shake.

“Price Delacroix.” He had the world-weary cynicism in his eyes that made her look twice. Everything about the man made her come back for a second helping. Emerald eyes, tanned skin, close-cropped dark hair, muscles that rippled under his shirt and slacks. Yum.

When his big hand engulfed hers, a shiver of pure sex went down her spine. Oh baby. She swallowed and tried to come up with something intelligent to say. “The new police chief. From L.A.”

“Yes, ma’am.” She winced at the *ma’am*. Jesus, she wasn’t that old. Thirty-four was *not* old damn it.

He jerked his chin towards the coffee shop, indicating that she should precede him. She fished around for her keys and headed for the side door. The heat from his big body embraced her, and she felt crowded up against the door. Her hormones made it clear they wouldn’t mind a bit more crowding. She cleared her throat. “So what brings you to Cedarville?”

The first thing that hit her when she opened the door was the stench. Acrid. Smothering. Disgusting. Her business always smelled of coffee and baked goods. Now it made her stomach turn. She swallowed the lump in her throat.

“I wanted a change of pace.” His gaze swept the big room where she kept most of the industrial size ovens and cooling racks. An enormous stainless steel prep table dominated the middle of the room. Through a swinging door opposite of the side entrance was the main room where the fire had happened. Even from here she could see damage. Smoke and soot had stained the ceiling. Black dust covered everything. The swinging door was twisted and warped from heat.

“Burn out, huh?” She grabbed on to the conversation with the police chief for dear life. Anything to keep from thinking about how long this was going to close her shop for repairs. She turned her back on the damage and faced him. A lot of city people moved to Cedarville to get away from the high pressure of city life. She should know—she was one of them.

“Something like that.” That cynical gaze swept down her body, and she saw what kind of assessment he was doing. Sexual, carnal.

Heat followed in the wake of his gaze. Her fingers tightened into fists, what was wrong with her? Her livelihood was trashed and she was getting wet over some guy she’d just met. Then again, if her business was in shambles, wringing herself out with a pretty man was a nice distraction. A slow smile curled her lips, and she gave him a very thorough and obvious once-over. “Married?”

“I was once. I’m divorced. You?” He crossed his arms over his chest, and she could see the delineation of his big muscles through his dress shirt.

She shook her head. “Same. Kids?”

“Nope.”

“Me neither.” *So you could meet your soul mate today.* Jericho’s words came back to her in a quick rush, but she pushed the thought away. Soul mate? Yeah, right. Bedmate? *We might have a winner here.* She grinned.



He arched a brow, but smiled back. Man, he had a killer smile. A flash of white teeth and the sexiest dimples she'd ever seen. His expression said he knew exactly what she was thinking, and he more than reciprocated, but his voice was all business. He pulled a pad of paper and pen out of his suit jacket. "I'm here to take your statement. About the fire."

She nodded and forced herself to face the destruction. It was just as bad as it had been, and she swayed a little on her feet as the details bombarded her again. Strong arms caught her, tugged her against a broad chest. She leaned against him, buried her nose in his chest and inhaled the scent of *him* and his spicy cologne, and let herself be weak for a moment longer. But the feel of his hard planes molding to her softer curves sent a shock of lust through her that curled her toes. One of his hands stroked up her spine and bracketed the nape of her neck, tilting her head back until she looked him in the eyes. They really were the most incredible shade of green. Her body reacted, loosening some muscles, tightening others as it prepared for sex. She could feel the impressive length of his erection riding against her belly. Moisture flooded her core, and her pussy clenched. Her nipples hardened while the rest of her melted against him, a throb of utter want going through her. His gaze sharpened, focusing on her lips and she was certain he was going to kiss her. The heat reflected in his eyes was enough to burn.

Burn.

The word jolted her back to reality. She was standing in her burned-out building ready to shove a man she'd only just met against the nearest wall and jump his bones. What the hell was the matter with her?

"Are you all right, Ms. Mathison?" His voice was a harsh rasp, showing that he was as affected by this as she was. It was a very small comfort. His grip on her eased, and her hormones whimpered at the loss of contact. His tone gentled. "Aubrey?"

Forcing herself to pull away, she shoved a hand through her newly shortened hair and waved the other in a vague circle that encompassed the room. "I—I'm fine. Sorry about that. It's shocking seeing it like this."

"It's hard to see something you love in shambles." He squeezed her shoulder gently before stepping away. "Are you ready?"

She swallowed and nodded. Somehow it was bearable with him there as a solid, steady presence. It emanated from the man—rock-solid, dependable, a man who'd seen it all and still held people's hands when their lives fell apart. Like he had with her. It was odd to *know* so much about him in just those few moments of interaction, but somehow she was certain she wasn't wrong. She could understand why they'd hired him as police chief.

Working their way through the shop, she explained the details of what happened the day before. What she could remember of it. Some of it was a confused blur of chaos, heat and panic. She doubted she'd ever remember all of what happened clearly. Her throat was parched and swollen from all the talking when she came to a halt beside the stove. "So, are we done here?"

"Yes." He tucked his pen and paper back in his jacket. "You can pick up the report this afternoon."

"Thanks." Then she'd have make sure it got to her insurance agency, schedule some estimates for repairs, close down until the repairs were complete and they got the horrible stink out of her shop. A headache throbbed behind her eyes when she started making a list of everything she had to do, and she shoved all thought of the delicious Chief Delacroix from her mind. She had bigger things to deal with.

If Jericho was right, and the Big Man Upstairs did this on purpose, she was ready to kick Him in the shins for it.

## Chapter Two

A week later, she was checking the progress on Bean There, Done That. Her insurance agent was still duking it out with the company that had installed the sprinkler system, but she'd gotten the green light on starting repairs. She had a feeling Price had stepped in and smoothed over a few bumps for her in that little snafu. He'd never said anything about it, but he'd been by a few times to see how she was doing, always polite, always watchful, always with that simmer of too-tempting awareness in his gaze.

Shoving her hands in her pockets, she ignored thoughts of Price and focused on her shop. The nauseating smell seemed to have dissipated. Thank goodness. The ceiling and floor tiles around the stove needed replacing, as did the stove and the counter beside it. A fresh coat of paint would cover up the blackened wall behind the stove. Every bit of cloth, from curtains to chair cushions to dishrags had to go. They all stank of smoke.

She'd already hired a crew who specialized in fire damage to scrub the place from top to bottom and had done a whole lot of the nasty work herself. Bone-deep exhaustion sapped at her strength, but Bean There, Done That was starting to look as good as ever. A little spark of joy lit inside her. She rubbed her hand down the new door that separated the front and back rooms.

Yeah. Everything was going to be okay. Some quiet panic that had gripped her belly and weighed on her chest since she'd seen the damage began to ease. Bean There, Done That had been her lifeline, her escape. A shaky sigh eased past her lips.

After all the workmen filed out for the day, she locked up behind them and walked across the street. She had to pass through the park to get home. Jericho sat in his normal place on the park bench. Her stride checked a bit when she saw him. His prediction about the fire still freaked her out a bit.

*Get over yourself, Aubrey. The man is off his meds.* She snorted and jogged across the street, automatically rooting around the bottom of her purse for coins. Crazy or not, he was a vagabond with no real way to get food.

He smiled his usual smile as she approached. "Hi there. How's the restoration coming?"

"Just peachy, thanks." She handed over the change. "How're you?"

"Good, good." He waved her off. She sped past, relieved he didn't say anything weird this time. A ridiculous amount of gratitude filled her at the reprieve. "Hang on a second, Aubrey."

Freezing, she muttered every curse she knew under her breath. She even came up with a couple of inventive compound cusswords. Smiling—and hoping it didn't look more like a grimace—she turned around. "Yeah?"

Mr. Crazy Man was back. He hummed a little before speaking again. "Dogs are bad luck for you today."

Shit. She hunched her shoulder and spun away. "Thanks."

If she went her normal route home, she'd have to pass by the dog park that made up a corner of the town square.

Maybe she would try a different way. Just for the change of scenery. Change was good for the soul, wasn't it? If she

went by the dog park, it just seemed like too much self-fulfilling prophecy.

Taking a left off the main path where she usually took a right, she wandered into the older district of town that had great Victorian houses. She'd always loved that style of architecture, but Scott had wanted modern. Now that she lived alone, it just seemed like too much upkeep. And maybe it was because she was afraid it would put her one step away from crazy cat lady to rattle around in a big old house like that. She turned the corner on to her street. She had four blocks left to go.

"Woof." Her blood ran cold at the deep bark that came from behind her. A lot of people walked these streets in the evening. And took their dogs with them.

A kid of about twelve had lost the leash on his Great Dane. The air went whistling out of her in what might have been a high-pitched squeak.

It wasn't that she believed Jericho or anything, but the fire thing had kind of creeped her out. Watching that pony-sized excuse for a dog running at her made her blood run cold. Anyone would freak out. It had nothing to do with Jericho's warning. Nope. Not a thing.

She backpedaled as fast as her legs could carry her just the same. The back of her ankles hit something that yelped and the next thing she knew she was going down hard on the pavement. Her back arched when her tailbone made sharp contact with the ground and all the breath rushed out of her lungs. Curling into a fetal position on her side, she wrapped her arms around her knees and tried remember why she didn't want to die right then.

When she opened her eyes, a pointy little muzzle snapped in her face as a dachshund yapped. Dog breath, *blech*. She groaned and pushed into a sitting position. A strong arm wrapped around her back to cradle her against a wide chest. *Price Delacroix*.

"Don't move, Aubrey." His deep voice rumbled, and that was all it took to get her hot and bothered. Her sex dampened at the sound of his rich, deep tones. The way he smelled. The hardness of his muscles against her body. *Thank you, Jesus*.

"I'm fine." She tried to pretend the breathiness of her voice was just from having the wind knocked out of her. The way her nipples tightened and her muscles softened told her it was a lie.

"You took a hard fall. Stay there." His words were almost harsh, but his touch was gentle when he brushed her hair away from her face. She fought the urge to lean her cheek into his palm. Everything about this man made her react. Her original assessment that the two of them were destined to burn up the sheets was dead on. She really wanted to try him on for size. She'd bet he fit just fine. "I'm really all right, Chief."

"Price. You'll call me Price." His other arm slid under her bent knees and lifted her as he stood.

She squeaked and clutched his shoulders. His soft T-shirt bunched in her fingers as she held on tight. "Don't drop me."

A wicked grin flashed over his face before he focused on her eyes. Some of her panic must have shown because he cuddled her closer. "Not a chance, sugar."

"Is she all right, Chief Delacroix?" Mrs. Chambers, the biggest gossip in town, reined in her wiener dog and stared at the two of them.

"Oh, she's fine. Ma'am." He dipped his head in a nod, dismissing the older woman while he turned to walk up the driveway in front the big Victorian on the corner. She sighed in envy when she saw it.

She glanced over his shoulder at Mrs. Chambers. An avid gleam entered the older woman's eyes as he mounted the

porch. Pitching her voice low, Aubrey had to warn him. “Look, I know you’re new in town, but Mrs. Chambers—” He nudged the front door of his house open, and then kicked it shut behind them. “Will spread it all over town that I carried you into my house? And will probably embellish it by saying that I practically stripped you on the sidewalk and fucked you against the street lamp.”

“She won’t say ‘fuck’, but yeah.” She arched her eyebrows. If people wanted anything to be discreet in a small town, they made damn sure the town gossip did not find out. He was from L.A. Maybe he thought it was only in Mayberry TV-land that gossips told the whole town, who then knew your business, and felt free to chat with you about it.

“Well, that’s fine.” He sounded unruffled as he set her on his kitchen counter. Oh, man. The whole place looked like something out of *Architectural Digest*. She almost whimpered.

*Focus, Aubrey.* Future sex life at stake here. She was not interested in having her customers comment about her boffing the police chief. Even if she intended to do so. “Um, you know I have to live in this town? And no nice girl is going to date you now because they’ll think we’re an item. It doesn’t matter if they all know Mrs. Chambers is making it up.”

“Then we’ll have to make it the truth. You’ll just have to date me.” He shrugged and started to feel her up. She told herself he was just checking for injuries, but her hormones didn’t care. Price was here, and he was sliding those big, strong hands over her body.

She clenched her teeth to hold back a different kind of whimper. “And fuck you against a street lamp? I think not.”

“We can improvise.” He angled a cocky glance up at her. “Fucking me in my house is close enough.”

She laughed, inserting as much derision in her tone as possible. He didn’t need to know that the thought of fucking him anytime, anywhere, made her quiver, did he? No. No, he didn’t. And that was her final answer...at least until they’d gone out once or twice. Well, once would probably do at this point.

She pushed herself forward on the counter until her feet touched the floor. “Well, thanks so much for—”

His eyebrow arched, and that wicked flash of white teeth in his tanned face was her only warning before he crowded her against his cupboard. His hands braced on either side of her. Trapped. He leaned forward until his eyes were level with hers, until his lips were a whisper away from her mouth. “Laugh now, sugar. But I’ll have you stripped bare and in my bed tonight. Count on it.”

She swallowed hard, fumbling for something witty to say, but nothing came to mind. Heat spiraled tight within her belly, and liquid flooded her pussy.

“I—” Her breath rushed out on a whoosh as she pictured them together, naked on soft sheets in a big bed. *Oh. God. Yes.* She wanted that so much. Her heart leapt and began to race, the muscles in her legs shaking with the effort to keep her upright.

The sides of his eyes crinkled when he grinned. His green gaze dropped to her lips, and they tingled. She licked them, and his gaze followed the motion. One hand lifted to bracket her jaw and hold her in place while he closed the infinitesimal distance between them to brush his mouth over hers.

She shouldn’t let him get away with his cocky proclamation about sexing her up, but damn. The man could kiss. Her mind went hazy, and time seemed to stretch. His lips played over hers in slow, worshipful sweeps. Not demanding, not taking. It wasn’t what she’d expected. Nothing about him was what she expected. She shouldn’t let him touch her, but right now she couldn’t remember why.

His hands curved around her ribs, one sliding down to cup her backside, the other moved up to palm her breast. He

pulled her pelvis flush against his, and the ridge of his cock rubbed her through their pants. She wanted him inside her. She burned with the craving. Still he kissed her, licking his way into her mouth, twining his tongue with hers. His thumb chafed her nipple, circling the nub until lightning strikes of pleasure flashed from her breast to her pussy. A moan tore from her throat and she tried to climb him, wrapping her legs around his waist.

A low groan rumbled in his chest as he ground against her. She fisted her fingers in his hair, sucked his lower lip into her mouth and arched into him.

Ripping his mouth from hers, he let his head drop back. She slid her tongue up his throat, the hot, masculine taste of his flesh flooding her mouth. His breath hissed between his teeth. “Aubrey—”

“Price.” She bit the corded muscle in his neck and he shuddered, jerked back and set her on her feet. Swaying, she slid her hands over the muscled planes of his chest.

“So, I was just about to have dinner.” He grabbed her wrists, stilling her movements. Her breath caught and her eyes popped wide in shock as he stepped away from her. The shrill beep of a timer going off echoed in the big kitchen. He smiled. “Right on time.”

“You’re *stopping*?” She was going to kill him. Dead. Her whole body screamed with want, her skin felt too tight, and she would implode any moment.

He stroked a finger down her arm, and goose bumps followed in the wake of his touch. “You’ve never heard of foreplay, sugar?”

Shoving both hands in her hair, she tried to straighten the mess. “That was more than foreplay, damn it.”

“Not the way I do it.”

Damn him, now she wanted to know how he did it. She bit back a snarl. She had two options here. She could stomp out in a huff for him toying with her and leaving her high and dry. Wet. Whatever. Or, she could eat dinner and then make him carry through on all those promises. The needs rushing through her body made the first one a non-option.

“Okay. We’ll do it your way.” She grabbed the edge of her T-shirt and pulled it over her head, dropping it on the counter. Her bra was a barely-there scrap of lace, and the cool air brushing over her arms and midriff made her shiver. His eyes heated as he took in her bare skin, but wariness also flashed in his gaze. “What are you doing?”

She offered him up a smile sweet enough to send him into sugar shock. “Foreplay.”

His breath whooshed out as she flicked open the snap on her jeans and made a slow show of pushing them down her legs. He reached for her when she stepped out of the denim. She danced out of his reach, smacking his hands away.

“Ah, ah, ah. What’s for dinner? I’m *starving*.”

“You little—”

Arching an eyebrow, she ran her fingertip around the lace band of her panties. “Don’t start a game you don’t want to play, Chief.”

“Oh, I want to play,” he growled, emerald fire flickering in his eyes.

“Good.” She sauntered over to the stove to peek in and see what they were having. Some kind of casserole. It smelled great. She didn’t care, she just wanted Price to touch her again, but she’d play this out to the end.

Eating was a dance of erotic pleasure. Every movement, every bite, every breath heightened the need between them until she could have cut through the sexual tension in the room with a knife. Her nipples were so hard the lace of her bra brushing against them was painful. Her underwear was damp with moisture, and she kept her thighs crossed tightly to try and suppress some of the ache between them. A hot blade of want sliced through her until she couldn’t

stand it anymore. Setting her plate aside, she stood from the dinner table.

In one fluid motion, he was on his feet, blocking her path. “Going somewhere, sugar?”

“Yes.”

He folded his arms across his broad, muscled chest. “Oh?”

Giving him the kind of smile that should have sent his blood rushing straight to his groin, she spun toward the staircase. She let her fingers trail up the silky smooth wood of the banister as she mounted the steps. His heavy tread followed her up. Her breathing sped until she was almost panting with the excitement twisting deep within her.

Reaching behind her, she unsnapped her bra and tugged it off to hang on the newel post at the top of the stairs. The wide balcony overlooked the living room as well as the dining room with their abandoned dishes.

An open doorway directly across from her showed rumpled navy blue sheets on a king size bed. Grinning, she spun around and crossed an arm over her breasts to cover herself from his view.

He chuckled. “You can’t play shy now, sugar.”

For each step he took forward, she took one back. He jerked his T-shirt over his head and dropped it on the carpet. The backs of her knees hit the mattress and she let herself fall. She cupped her hands around her breasts, tweaking the nipples with her fingers. He groaned. Slipping one hand down over the swell of her stomach, she dipped into the damp lace of her panties. “You seem to think I have a problem starting without you.”

“Oh Jesus.” He stripped out of his jeans so fast, she wouldn’t have been surprised if he had rug burns on his legs.

Which was fine with her—he deserved some pain for making her stop for dinner earlier.

He didn’t wear underwear. Interesting. A smile curved her lips as she looked him over in all his sculpted glory. He was beyond beautiful. Golden skin stretched taut over hard muscles. His cock jutted in a heavy upward arc. The fading sunlight from the window flashed on the bead of moisture at the tip of his dick.

She bit her lip and rubbed her fingertips over her clit. Her knees fell open against the mattress, and she arched into her hand. Moisture slicked her fingers as she circled her clit slowly, teasing herself, teasing him. His brilliant green gaze burned a path from her taut nipples to her lace-covered pussy. She could feel the way he moved his gaze over her like a caress, and it only made her yearning deeper. Choking on a breath, she plunged two digits into her hot channel, fucking herself with her fingers while he watched. “Now, Price. I want you *now*.”

“You don’t have to tell me twice.” Kneeling on the bed, he reached for her and froze. Then he stood and turned away.

She propped herself on one elbow, her fingers stilling as uncertainty darted through her. “Price?”

He flipped on the light in his bathroom and rifled for something in his medicine cabinet. When he came back, he lifted his palm to show her a handful of silver condom packages. He tossed them on the nightstand.

Oh. Embarrassment curled through her. She hadn’t even thought of protection. She always practiced safe sex, and she was so out of her head for this guy...she hadn’t considered something as basic as condoms. Her lips twisted. This was not good. In fact, it was dangerous and stupid. What the hell was she doing messing with someone like Price? He had the tall, dark, and cynical thing that she found incredibly attractive, even likeable. He was the kind of man who was easy to fall for, and she wasn’t interested in falling. The kind of man she avoided, the chemistry too potent to control, too dark, too complicated.

She shuddered and refocused on him when his fingers curved around her knee. Instant reaction, her body flashing hot as tingles exploding over her skin. His other hand lifted her palm to his lips. “Something wrong, sugar?”

His heavy-lidded gaze watched for her response, assessing her. But desire underlay the penetrating look. He wanted

her—she could see how much. Answering need throbbed through her, reminding her why she had agreed to this in the first place. Could she do this just once and not get addicted?

His lips played over the sensitive flesh of her palm, biting the base of her thumb. The slight pain was nothing to the dart of pleasure that went through her. She closed her eyes and swallowed. Fire skated over her flesh in rolling waves. She wanted this too much. She couldn't turn away from it. From him.

Just this once.

“No, nothing worth mentioning.” She grinned at him, holding his gaze as she reached for his cock. Every muscle in his big body tensed as she stroked up and down the long length of him. She massaged the glistening beads of cum that dripped from the head of his dick into his hot flesh. His veins pulsed beneath the skin, his cock jerking in her hand.

His breath hissed out when she rolled her palm over the head of his dick and used the other to cup the heavy sac at the base of his thick shaft. “Aubrey.”

“Kiss me.”

He chuckled, swooping down to cover her mouth with his. There was no gentleness now, no slow seduction. Just hot, naked want. His hands cupped her breasts, pushing them together so he could suck each of the nipples into his mouth. When he bit down on one tight crest, she slid her fingers in his hair and tugged on the silky strands. Her body bowed and writhed underneath him as he batted her nipple with his tongue, shoving it against the roof of his mouth. “Condom,” she gasped.

Lunging, he swiped a foil packet off the bedside table. A light tremble shook his fingers as he unwrapped the condom and rolled it down the long, hard length of his cock. She loved that she could push him to the edge of his control—she doubted much could make the man's hands shake. It turned her on even more that she could do that to him. She opened her arms as he moved between her thighs.

She arched as he seated himself to the hilt in one swift plunge, wrapping her legs around his flanks. Her pussy fisted around his cock, the stretch almost painful, but even the pain was edged in ecstasy. She bit down on his shoulder hard, the taste of his sweat-damped flesh bursting over her tongue. He shuddered and fucked her hard, his rhythm deep and relentless. She was right there with him, raking her nails down his back, silently demanding everything he had and then some. She wanted *more* and deliberately clenched her inner walls on his cock.

“Jesus, *Aubrey*.” He groaned, the sound as helpless and needy as she felt. He ground his pelvis against her, every thrust hitting her just right until she was sobbing for breath. His hot scent filled her nose, as well as the musky smell of sex and sweat. Their flesh slapped together with ruthless strokes, the carnal sound echoing in the room. She was so hot, she thought she'd burst into flames at any moment. And she didn't care. She grabbed the taut globes of his ass, urging him on with soft gasps and cries.

Reaching between them, he rolled his fingertip over her clit, still hammering his cock deep inside her pussy. It was too much. It was exactly what she craved. “Price, Price, *Price!*”

Her sex milked his dick in never-ending waves that dragged her beyond any understanding of pleasure she'd ever had before. Tingles raced over her skin as he continued to penetrate her, driving her orgasm to new depths until every muscle in his big body locked and he came too. Another spasm shook her and made her sob, a single tear sliding down her cheek.



God, nothing had ever felt so perfect in her entire life. It was crazy. He groaned and sank on top of her. She held him close, allowing herself a single moment to breathe in his scent and feel the solid heat of his body against hers. It was comforting and warm contentment wound through her. She sighed. Her eyes drifted shut, and she stroked a hand down his back. She'd get herself together and go in a few minutes. She was asleep before she finished the thought.

## Chapter Three

Sunshine filtered through her eyelids. God, it was morning already? She rolled on to her back and stretched her arms over her head, arching her back. When she opened her eyes, she realized that she wasn't in her own bedroom. These weren't her sheets or pillows. When she took a deep breath, the mellow spiciness of Price's cologne came to her. Glancing over, she saw that he wasn't in bed with her. She could hear the shower running in his bathroom. She grinned and stretched, her muscles pleasantly sore from the night before. *Mmm-hmm*. The best sex of her life. With a very creative and naughty man. Images from the night before flipped through her mind. She'd lost count of the number of times he'd made her come. That same sweet contentment flooded her, and the smile widened on her lips. Then she stopped herself, every muscle going rigid. There was no *contentment* allowed with a man—that led to dangerous things. Like thinking she was in love. Believing he loved her back. Relationships. Entanglements. Complicated shit she'd written off when she signed her divorce papers.

Panic exploded in her belly. Time to get the hell out of here. Throwing her legs over the edge of the bed, she stood. Where were her clothes? Oh, yeah. Downstairs. Picking up the sheet they'd kicked off the bed, she tucked it around herself and tiptoed for the door. If she could get out of here before he got out of the shower, she'd be home free. Yes, it was gutless and cowardly, but she needed *out of here*. She needed to regroup and reassess. And to kick her own ass for even getting all warm and fuzzy with the guy. He'd even *spooned* her the night before. And she'd liked it. She was clearly losing her edge...that, or her marbles.

No strings attached. Damn it. She dated lightly, she had fun, she did not stay the night, and she did *not* spoon. Stupid, stupid, *stupid*. Snatching her bra off the newel post, she grabbed the trailing ends of the sheet so she wouldn't trip on them and hurried down the stairs. Her clothes were right where she'd left them, piled in the living room near their discarded dinner. Except for her panties, which were still up in Price's room.

"Going somewhere?" Price's deep voice boomed like thunder above her.

Every muscle in her body locked tight, rooting her in place. *Shit. Caught*. Turning her head, she saw him leaning his forearms against the banister. The picture of casual. Except when she met his eyes. Suppressed fury simmered there. She winced and didn't bother to answer his question. They both knew where she'd been headed—out the door without a backward glance.

“You forgot something.” Her lacy panties dangled from his fingertip.

“Souvenir.” She smiled and tried to bravado her way out of what was turning into a sticky situation. Seriously? *Seriously*? What single man in his thirties didn’t know the one-nighter protocol? If the other party wanted to bail, you weren’t allowed to get upset. “Thank you for a lovely time, but I’ll just be go—”

“Freeze,” he barked in a voice reserved for criminals. But she froze just the same. There was no disregarding that tone.

She watched him stalk down the stairs in silence, every inch the dangerous man, the predator. It sent a thrill through her to watch him, and she stomped all over any kind of enamored feeling. That road led to ugliness and heartache. Her underwear hit the coffee table in front of her as he flung them down and crossed his arms over his chest, his muscles rippling with the movement. He wore only a pair of jeans, his damp hair sleek against his scalp.

The fact that he had any clothes on reminded her that she was still naked. She snagged her panties from where he’d dropped them and pulled them on. Then her jeans, bra, T-shirt and shoes. Okay, it was way past time to go. He watched her dress, but didn’t say anything. The silence was suffocating. She sighed. “Look. I had a great time. I really did, but I can’t do this.”

“You *did* do this.” He braced foot on the low table, and propped a forearm on his knee. The morning sun streaming through the windows played over his broad shoulders.

She dragged her gaze away from his muscles and focused on his face. “You know what I mean. I’m not interested in more than what we did last night. And this morning. I don’t do serious.”

“I haven’t asked for anything—”

“I know. It’s not your fault. It’s all me.” Jesus, she couldn’t believe she was going to give a guy the *it’s not you, it’s me* speech. This was surreal. She also couldn’t believe he was going to nail her for this. What guy didn’t want no-strings sex? Scott sure as hell loved it with the waitresses on their restaurant staff. Her spine snapped straight at the reminder of why she didn’t do complications. Her eyes narrowed. “To be blunt—”

“When aren’t you?” His tone had gone *sotto voce*, and she wanted to kick him. Of course, that would put her within his arm’s reach, and him getting his hands on her again was a bad idea. Very bad. A wash of heat went through her, and she studiously ignored it. She didn’t want this, she didn’t want him, she’d had her night of fun, he was out of her system, and it was over. Done.

It had to be. For her own good.

She crossed her arms tightly across her chest to cover the betraying tightness of her nipples. “*To be blunt*, you’re the kind of guy I could fall for. And I can’t do that. I just can’t. I’m sorry.” That may have been an over-share, but it seemed to shut him up. Surprise flashed across his face and his mouth snapped closed so fast his teeth clacked together.

She took that as her cue to go, so she picked up her purse, walked out and didn’t allow herself to look back.

Thank God she had her shop renovations to throw herself into for the rest of the day. Since she had to redo all her upholstery and repaint a wall, she’d decided to redo the earth-toned color scheme of Bean There, Done That to something more vibrant. The insurance company was paying for it, so why not do an impromptu remodel? Her new curtains and chair cushions should arrive the following week. She worked until her eyes began to cross with exhaustion. The fact that she hadn’t slept the night before didn’t help at all. The sun had begun to set when she

finally washed out the brushes she'd used to paint. The workmen had gone home hours before.

A knock on the front door of her shop had her head popping up from where she was bent over the sink. Leaning to the side to see through the glass, she spotted Price. Her heart stuttered at the sight of him, and she groaned. Man, she had it bad. She was jonesing for him like a crack addict who'd just escaped from rehab.

Good thing she would never let it go further than one night of hot sex. She'd had to restrain herself from thinking about him today. And he had to come here and screw it up. She wondered if he'd arrest her if she ignored him.

Probably. She wouldn't put it past him. He wasn't exactly a beta male. Nope, full on alpha. Too bad she liked that in her men. Someone who could match her. Not permanently, but she shouldn't have to be bored while she was dating, right?

Heat wound through her as she remembered his hands on her skin, his body moving over hers, his lips playing against her mouth. She wanted him to go away. She wanted him to give her more. She was so fucking confused.

Rubbing a tired hand down her face, she let out a shaky breath as she stepped around the counter to unlock the door. He propped his forearm against the doorjamb and looked her over at his leisure. A shiver slid down her flesh. "Hey, sugar."

"Chief."

He straightened and walked past her into the shop. His gaze swept the interior. "You've almost got it all fixed up—it doesn't even look like there was a fire. Nice."

Her arms folded around her middle. "What are you doing here, Price? We talked this morning about how we wouldn't see each other again."

He leaned his elbows back against the countertop, crossing his legs at the ankle. "No, *you* said we wouldn't see each other again. I never agreed."

Panic skittered down her spine. "Price, please—"

"Begging is good. And I love it when you please me, Aubrey." A slow smile crossed his handsome face.

Her eyes narrowed to dangerous slits. She poked a finger towards his chest. "You know what? Just...shut up. We had a one-night stand, Chief. I'm betting it wasn't your first, and I doubt very much that it'll be your last. I told you, I don't do relationships."

He *tsked* low in his throat. "But you do more than a bunch of one-night stands. I asked around about you—"

"You *asked around*?" Her eyebrows arched and her mouth sagged open for a moment. "I live in this little hamlet, Price. People are going to talk if you start asking around about my sexual history."

He continued as though she hadn't spoken. "I asked around about you, and you've dated six men in the last few years, all for roughly two to three months. Just long enough for them to want more than sex and start making noises about wanting a real relationship. Am I getting warm?"

Her teeth ground together, but she refused to give him the satisfaction of answering. Apparently, her silence was enough for him, because a knowing smile curved his full lips. She offered him a glare in return and stomped behind the counter. Presumptuous jackass. "It doesn't matter what you think. You can't force me to date you. Or sleep with you."

"Force?" Anger sparked in his eyes as he slapped his hands on the counter and leaned toward her. "I sure as hell didn't force you to strip tease for me last night."

"And I said 'not again' this morning." Her hands planted on her hips. "No means no, Price. I'm sure you can grasp

the concept.”

He pushed himself upright, stalking her across the coffee shop. She backpedaled as fast as she could until she’d gone all the way into the back room and was pressed against the prep table. The heat of his big body enveloped hers, and she fought a moan. Please God, don’t let him touch her again. She would *not* be able to handle it.

Bracing her hands on the prep table, she pulled herself up to sit on it. Anything to get some distance. Her body screamed for more of him. His hands, his lips, his teeth and tongue. She shuddered, heat racing through her. Her pussy clenched on nothing, and she could feel herself get slick with want. She sucked in a breath, trying to calm her pounding heart. It just drew his cologne to her. He smelled amazing, and her skin had smelled like him this morning when she woke up. His scent mixed with hers. Her nipples peaked tight, thrusting against the cotton bra she wore. He laid his hands on the table beside her hips, his thumbs grazing her skin through her jeans. Leaning in, his gaze met hers. “You want me.”

She couldn’t deny it, not when her nerves jangled with how much she needed to touch him. She folded her arms as she tried not to reach out and stroke her fingers down the hard planes of his chest. “I told you... I can’t do this.”

“You also said I was the kind of guy you could fall for.” His lips brushed her ear, his voice taking on the low rumble that made her insides melt. “I’m the kind of guy who’d always catch you.”

“Don’t say things like that.” Her hands fisted in his shirt, her heart stumbling. It wasn’t true. It didn’t matter how much she liked him or how good he was in bed, she knew how this would end if she gave too much of herself.

“I’m just telling the truth, sugar.”

And then he slid one hand into her hair and kissed her. Every thought in her mind deserted her. He sucked her lower lip into his mouth, scraping her lightly with his teeth. She moaned, used her grip on his shirt to pull him closer, and wrapped her legs around his hips. Grunting, he settled against her and used his other hand to cup her ass. His hard cock rubbed her just right, grinding against her hard little clit.

Letting her head fall back, she arched into him as pleasure burned through her. He took advantage—sucking and biting a light trail of kisses down her neck. Her pussy clenched, so hot and wet she couldn’t stand it. She throbbed, her nipples so hard they ached. “Price, please. I want you.”

He groaned, a great shudder rippling through him. Slipping his hands to her waist, he popped the button on her pants and unfastened the zipper with a slow rasp that echoed in the wide room. “Lift your hips.”

“Tell me you have a condom.” She leaned back on her hands, leveraging herself up so he could pull her jeans and panties down in one swift movement.

He jerked open his slacks, magically produced a little foil package from God knew where, and had himself sheathed in record time. Which was a good thing because she didn’t think she could wait. Then his mouth was on hers again, her legs were around his waist, and he was easing that long, hard cock into her slick sex. The stretch was divine, and when he began moving inside her, it was with the swift, almost punishing rhythm that she hadn’t known she needed. She threw her head back, gasping.

“You’re so wet, sugar. Wet and tight. I love the feel of your pussy around me.” Sweat slid down his temples as his gaze caught hers. With her sitting on the table, he hit her G-spot with every single thrust. She couldn’t stop a whimpering moan at his words, his movements. Everything he did made her want more.

He dipped his head and sucked her nipple into his mouth through her shirt and bra. He bit down hard enough to make her choke, to make her sex spasm. She gasped, “I love the way you touch me.”

Worrying her nipple between his teeth, he chuckled when she squealed. He released her captured breast and cupped her ass in his hands, pulling her tighter to him. She had no idea how he managed it, but one fingertip teased the tight bud of her anus. She clung to his shoulders, pushing back to take him deeper into her ass. He chuckled, watching her react. “And I love touching you.”

Tingles skipped down her arms and legs, waves of heat following in their wake. He barely nudged his finger in her backside as he continued to thrust his cock into her pussy and the dual sensation was enough to make her sob. The table squeaked and shuddered under their weight as they moved together, their skin slapping, their harsh breath mingling. He filled her again and again, relentless as he shoved her toward the edge of orgasm. And she was right there with him, wringing him with her thighs, clenching her pussy around his cock until he groaned her name. He ground himself against her clit, plunged his finger into her ass, and made her scream for him. Her sex convulsed, fisting on his dick as she came hard enough to make bursts of light explode behind her eyes. “Oh God, *Price*.” “This is so fucking amazing, Aubrey,” he gasped. She watched his eyes lose focus, his jaw locking as he lost himself in orgasm, pumping his long finger and cock inside her until he was spent and she was moaning helplessly with every minute movement he made within her channels.

They stayed there for a long time, their breathing gradually slowing, and their heart rates returning to normal. Only then did Price pull out of her. She shivered, sliding from the table to retrieve her jeans and redress. She could hear Price cleaning himself up and righting his clothing, but she didn’t dare look at him. The man was a serious hazard to her mental health. She’d decided not to touch him again or see him again, and here she was doing him in her coffee shop not twelve hours later.

She jerked upright when his hand closed around her arm. He handed her purse to her and drew her toward the door.

“W—what are you doing?”

“Taking you to dinner.”

“Isn’t that a little backwards?”

“So?” He moved his hand down to hers, cradling it in his big palm. It felt nice, secure. Dangerous, she warned herself. She tried to tug her hand free, but he wasn’t having it. Instead, he twined his fingers with hers and squeezed hard enough to make sure she couldn’t escape. Then he pulled her out the door and waited for her to use her free hand to lock up. “There’s a nice diner across the square. Let’s go there.”

Jericho gave them a wide smile when they passed by and—for once—had the decency not to make some crazy predictions. He kept his mouth shut and nodded to them as they passed. Price glanced at her. “Friend of yours?”

“Not exactly.” Her eyebrows lifted. “Why? Are the police going to escort him out of town?”

His big shoulder rolled in a shrug. “Not unless he starts bothering people.”

“He hasn’t bothered me.” Okay, so it wasn’t true. Jericho’s predictions bothered her, but before he’d started making them, they’d had no problems at all. As far as she could tell, he was just a nice old guy down on his luck.

Price nodded. “So long as he doesn’t harass anyone, we’re fine.”

Tugging at her hand again, she frowned when his fingers tightened. His thumb stroked over her flesh and goose bumps broke over her arms. When had she ever had a reaction this strong to anyone? Never. She was in so much trouble. How could she go on a date with someone she’d just had a one-night stand and a prep table quickie with? She had no clue, but Price had her hand and he wasn’t letting go, so it looked like she was about to get a crash course. He ushered her up the steps to the little mom and pop diner next door to Celia’s hair salon and snagged a booth near

the back. “The town gossip says you’re not from here either. Why did you come?”

“Burn out, like you. I’d had enough of the rat race after my divorce that I wanted a major change. We had all the same friends and business contacts, so I wanted out of it all.” She shrugged, not bothering to look at the menu since she’d been here a million times with Celia. “I took a vacation to the coast, ended up in Mrs. Chamber’s B&B...and never left.”

He nodded. “I came up to visit my brother and wanted to stick around.”

Mason was recruited from L.A. two years ago by some friend of a friend in the fire department. Aubrey didn’t know the specifics, but she knew he was well liked by everyone. So far, everyone seemed just as impressed with Price. Interesting family. She grinned. “Your brother has a serious thing for my best friend, Celia. He goes to her salon every week to flirt with her and ask her out.”

Flipping his menu closed, Price chuckled. “Mason isn’t a subtle man.”

“And you are?”

“We’re brothers for a reason.” He shrugged.

“Your dad has to be a terror.”

“So was my mom. You should have met them.” He chuckled softly, and they paused their conversation long enough to order when the waitress arrived.

“Should have as in past tense? What happened?”

“Car accident. They went together, which they would have wanted.” Sadness darkened his gaze and it made her reach over the table and squeeze his hand. He turned his palm up and laced her fingers through his again. “It was not long after my divorce...about five years ago. When I came up to see Mason last Christmas, I realized how much I missed having family around. I talked to the former police chief about a job, found out he was retiring, and no one on the force wanted the position. So, here I am.”

“Here you are.” She took a sip of her water and decided to get right to the point. “Why are you pushing us dating? This isn’t me playing hard to get. I don’t like those kind of games.”

They paused again as their order arrived. It was why she liked this place—the service was *fast* and the food was good. Price picked up his fork and his end of the conversation. “We’re not going to date.”

“Oh, good.” Relief flooded her because at this point she wasn’t sure she had the willpower to resist if he touched her.

“I’m glad we’re on the same page here.”

“You dump the guys you date after a few months. I’m not interested in that.”

“You are so right.”

He smiled. “Which is why we’re just getting married.”

She choked on the bite of the green beans she’d just swallowed. Her eyes watered, and she dove for her glass of water. After she’d chugged half the glass, she croaked out, “Are you out of your mind?”

“You can take as much time as you need to catch up with me on this one, but I’ve decided. And I’m all in. Get used to it.” He leaned back in the booth and laid his arm across the back of the bench.

“We just met a week ago. This is our first real date.”

His big shoulder lifted in a shrug. “When I make up my mind, I make up my mind.”

“Well, you can change your mind.”

“Not usually.”

“*Price.*”

“You know you turn me on when you get pissed.”

Her mouth gaped. “That is the most condescending, chauvinistic horseshit I have ever heard come out of a man’s mouth. And it’s fucking trite on top of that.”

“I still have a serious hard-on right now. It’s not something I can control.”

She sputtered for a second before she offered him a nasty glare. “You did that on purpose to try and get me to stop talking about how you’re *insane* to want to *marry* me on the second date. The first real out-of-the-house date.”

“Well, I might have mentioned this yesterday but you saw fit to strip naked. There was no way in hell I was letting you get sidetracked by anything. And I’d have told you this morning, but you ran out.” He took a swig of his coffee.

“I might have to spank you for that later.”

Fire exploded in her veins at the thought of his hand on her upturned ass. *Holy shit.* She just stared at him, heat flooding her cheeks. Her breathing hitched, and her hands clenched on the tabletop.

He met her gaze, his golden skin stretching taut over his sharp cheekbones. “Stop looking at me like that, sugar. I’m not fucking you again until you see things my way.”

“Then you’re not fucking me again.”

He just grinned. “We’ll see about that.”

“This is insane.” She tapped her fork against her plate agitatedly. “Do you really think it’s that simple to make a relationship out of thin air?”

“I knew you the moment I met you. End of story. I know it sounds crazy, but that’s how it is.” His heavy brows snapped together. “You think that’s easy for me to admit?”

“You make it sound easy.” She shifted uncomfortably. Hadn’t she thought that the first day they’d met? That she *knew* him...that she *liked* him?

“I’m divorced too, sugar. Don’t forget that. I’ve got a couple of scars of my own in the relationship department. I just haven’t written all women off.”

“I haven’t written men off.” But her protest sounded weak even to her own ears.

He arched an eyebrow. “You don’t think so?”

“I date.”

A derisive snort was his answer.

Uncertainty crawled through her. She was honest enough to admit she *had* written men off, but it sounded so much more cowardly when he said it that way, like she didn’t have a good reason to be leery of relationships...of men. “I don’t have to want to get married again. There’s nothing wrong with me if I want to be single.”

“Yeah, if you wanted to be single. You’re just scared.”

Anger simmered deep inside her, a knee-jerk reaction after being fucked around so badly in her last relationship.

“Drop. Dead.”

“It’s not going to make it untrue if you get mad.” He offered up a smirk. “But go ahead, sugar. You know how much I like it.”

The shriek that escaped her sounded like a whistling teakettle. Her hands fisted tightly and she had to think really hard about how stupid it would be to assault a police officer. Especially the Chief of Police. She tried to remind



herself about how she was too pretty for jail, and about how much he would enjoy it and smirk some more if he got to lock her in a cell. That mellowed her right out. No way in hell would she give him the satisfaction. She bared her teeth in a smile. “Well, since we’re playing by your rules now, you can get as turned on as you want, *sugar*, but you’re still not getting laid because I’m not *seeing things your way* any time soon.”

His mouth opened and closed. He narrowed his eyes at her, and now it was her turn to smirk. He deserved it for making her wait. He wanted strings attached to his sex? Fine. He got to dance around like Pinocchio then.

Of course, she was dancing alongside his stubborn ass. *Damn it.*

“Well, this is going to be interesting.” He grinned, challenge sparking in his gaze. “Finish your dinner.”

Because she didn’t have a clue what else to say to him, she did as he said. They finished their meal in silence, her insides churning so much that she just picked at her food. The waitress dropped off the check, he plopped down a few bills to cover the tab and stood. It left her eye-level with his groin, and she got a good enough look to tell her he hadn’t been lying about the erection. Her mouth watered needing a taste. She hadn’t sucked him last night, and she wanted to. He folded her hand in his and tugged her to her feet and out the door. “Come on. I’ll walk you home.”

## Chapter Four

Three weeks later, she still hadn’t convinced him that more sex was a good idea. No, a *great* idea. The man drove her up the wall, and she loved every minute of it. Damn him. She liked him more every moment she spent with him. He was everything she’d thought he was that first day—strong, steady, dependable—and a hell of a lot more. He made her laugh, he made her want, he made her crazy. That didn’t mean she was going to roll over and marry him because he said so. She still didn’t believe she was cut out for marriage, but she’d certainly like to roll over and do a lot of other things with him.

He’d dragged her out on a lot of non-dates—because he insisted they weren’t dating—and, on the fifth one, she’d talked him inside her apartment. In under thirty seconds, he’d had her pressed up against her living room wall, his tongue in her mouth and his hand up her skirt, stroking her through her soaking panties.

“I want you.”

“I want you too, sugar.”

And he still wouldn’t give in. The man had a will of absolute steel. It was unfair. She growled low in her throat.

“Fine,” she spat. “I guess you’re right that we’re...in a *relationship*.”

“Not good enough, sugar.” A smile kicked up one side of his mouth, and he shook his head down at her. “You know what it’ll take to—”

Her jaw clenched, and she tried to jerk away from him. “Since we’re not doing anything else tonight, you can see your way out.”

He chuckled. “Oh, but that was very good, Aubrey. Definite progress. I think you deserve a reward.”

“Wh—what do you mean by *reward*?” Wariness and hope twisted inside her. God, she was so hard up she couldn’t take much more. And neither could her vibrator. If she spent another night working herself over with it, it was going to give up the ghost.

His big hands cupped her hips as he sank to his knees. He slipped his fingers under her skirt and hooked into the top of her panties. His green gaze, hard with lust, never left hers as he slid the silk down to her ankles. “Step out of them.” She lifted her feet one at a time to let him pull them all the way off. He grinned and tucked them in his pocket. “I never did get my souvenir.”

“You can have my whole underwear drawer if you fuck—” Her mind shut down when his fingers thrust deep into her pussy. *Oh. Holy. God.*

His free hand slid up her thigh. She loved his touch on her skin, the slight calluses on his finger rasped over her sensitive flesh. It was amazing. Her skirt bunched around her thighs when he pulled her leg up and over his broad shoulder, opening her wide. His lips brushed the inside of her knee. She whimpered, heat whipping through her body. Her pussy was so slick, she could feel the excess moisture slip down her legs.

He licked a path up the inside of her thigh, catching the beads of wetness with his hot tongue. She moaned, clenching her fingers in his hair. Anticipation made her muscles shake, and her heartbeat thundered in her ears until she couldn’t hear anything else.

God, she’d waited so long for this, wanted it so badly.

His tongue dipped into her pussy, flicking over the wet labia. She choked when he closed his mouth over her clit and sucked hard. His fingers moved inside her, stroking fast and deep. Heat roared through her, tingles racing over her flesh in waves. Her pussy clenched around his thrusting digits, and she closed her eyes to feel her body tighten. She was close.

Hooking his fingers in her sex, he hit her in just the right spot to make her scream his name. He bit at her pulsing clit, and it was enough, more than enough, to shove her over into orgasm. Her pussy flexed, and her hips slapped against the wall as she arched toward the wicked talent of his mouth and fingers. She threw her head back and choked on a harsh sob. *Oh, God.* The muscles of her thighs jerked, and her breath bellowed out in rough pants. She shuddered over and over as the orgasm kept going.

When it finally ended, she collapsed in his arms, and he hugged her close to his broad chest. She straddled his lap, and she could feel the hot press of his cock between her legs. He was hard for her, and she wanted him so much. His tongue hadn’t been enough. She wanted *more*. She shivered as she remembered what it felt like to have his dick push into her sex. Yes. She needed that.

She planted a hand on his chest, pushing him flat. Moving her hand down his torso, she cupped his cock through his jeans. His hands locked around her wrists, stilling her movements. “Aubrey.”

Licking her lips, she gave him a grin she hoped would make him think of nothing but sex. Just the way she was. “It’s not sex. It’s a *reward*.”

“Shit.” He threw his arm over his eyes.

Flicking the tab on his jeans, she jerked the zipper open. No underwear, as usual. His heavy cock slipped free into her hand. He groaned when she touched him, stroked him. She wriggled down his hard body until she could lick the underside of his dick from base to tip. “Look at me. I want you to watch me.”

His arm dropped away until he could meet her gaze. The emerald fire that burned in his eyes made her nipples harden, made her pussy flash hot and wet again. She had to squeeze her thighs together for a moment to contain a harsh throb of want. “Aubrey, I—”

She grinned and sucked the length of him into her mouth. His fingers fisted in her hair, tugging on the long strands. The slight pain made her scalp throb, but it shot sensations straight to her pussy. She loved sucking cock, it was the headiest power trip she’d ever experienced. But with Price, it was something more. It wasn’t just the power of having him at her mercy, she was so turned on her pussy contracted with every thrust of his cock into her mouth. Her cheeks hollowed with every hard pull on his dick. Her own wetness increased when she tasted the pre-cum that beaded from the plum-shaped head. She moaned on his cock, fire building higher and higher in her pussy until she couldn’t bear it. His fingers clenched tighter in her hair, using his grip for leverage as his hips arched. She worked her hands and mouth up and down his hard cock, sucking him deep until he touched the back of her throat. He groaned, his hips lifted and he froze. His come jetted into her throat, and her pussy flexed on nothing as she came with him. She whimpered as they shuddered together, fire and ice streaking over her skin. Her eyes closed tight and tears leaked down her cheeks. Jesus, it had never been that intense for her before. She swallowed and pulled back to curl on to her side away from him. What the hell had just happened?

She clamped a hand over her mouth to hold back a sob. Emotion she couldn’t even begin to handle rolled through her. Price’s hand closed over her shoulder, but she resisted. “Please go away.”

“Aubrey—sugar—did I hurt you? What’s wrong?” An edge of panic rasped in his voice.

Curling deeper into herself, she tried to shut him out. “No, I’m fine.”

“Like hell.” He pushed his arm under her and rolled her to face him. She buried her face in his shoulder and cried in earnest, sobs shaking her whole body. He didn’t demand to know what was wrong, didn’t get pissed when she kept crying. No, he cradled her to his chest like she was the most precious thing in his life. It made her sob harder, and she wrapped her arms around his neck and held him tight.

She didn’t even know why she was crying. If he’d asked, she couldn’t have told him. It was everything, and nothing, and...she couldn’t even begin to describe this huge ball of emotion that ballooned in her chest when he was near. Taking it all in was more than she could deal with. Her sobs slowed, but tears still leaked from the corners of her eyes. Her chest hitched with every breath, and she pulled out of it enough to notice he’d settled her on his lap and was crooning to her the way he would a terrified child. It wasn’t even words, but it comforted her and she relaxed by degrees until she curled limply against him. She swiped the back of her hand over her cheeks. “I, um, I’m sorry. I don’t norm—”

“Shh.” He rested his chin on the top of her head, his hand stroking up and down her back. It made her eyes well with tears again, and she blinked fast to hold them back. What was wrong with her? This wasn’t normal. Nothing like this had ever happened to her, not even with Scott. And she’d been head over heels for him. But look how well that ended. God, she was so confused. Price brushed her hair back and kissed her forehead. A shiver ran down her spine. She thought she’d react to the man if she was on death’s doorstep. It was madness.

His hand continued rubbing her back in soothing circles. “Are you all right, sugar?”

She swallowed and nodded, too hollowed out by the firestorm of emotion she’d just spent to care that he’d seen her sob like a baby. She moved to rise, but he held her to him, shifting her in his arms so he could stand. He walked down the hall until he found her bedroom and laid her on the soft sheets. With quick efficiency, he stripped her and

then stepped back. She closed her eyes so she didn't have to watch him walk away like she had almost every night for the last three weeks. She couldn't do it, not tonight.

The mattress dipped as he settled beside her. Her eyes flew open, and she found that he'd shed his own clothes too. He pulled her to him so that they were plastered together from knee to chest. Her breasts crushed to his pecs and her nipples went so hard it was painful. She swallowed a moan when she felt his cock curve against her belly.

Angling a glance up at him, she shivered at the lust that always shone in his eyes. For her. "But you have a no-sex rule."

"You're worth breaking every damn rule, sugar."

Burying her fingers in his hair, she pulled him down until she could kiss him. His lips brushed over hers with a reverence she'd never experienced before. He lifted her leg so that it hooked over his hip. Tingles slipped over her skin, and she pressed closer. The head of his cock nudged at the swollen lips of her sex. She wanted him, her body molding itself to him. But this time, it wasn't a wild race to the finish, it was a slow burn that simmered from inside out.

His cock sank deep inside her with one hot, unhurried push. She sighed, enjoying the clasp of her flesh around him, the pull of desire that tugged at her very soul. It was perfect. Just the thought should panic her, but she was beyond caring about anything except savoring this moment with him. Price. His name rolled through her mind with the drugging sweetness of aged whiskey. She hummed in the back of her throat as their tongues danced.

Their hips rocked together and time became fluid, the slow throb of desire clenched her muscles. She pulled back to gasp out a breath, her muscles shook with suppressed longing. He cupped her ass, sliding his fingers forward to tease the lips of her pussy from behind. She moaned when he circled her anus. His gaze locked with hers and she felt orgasm build within her, but she held it off and held it off, wanting to stay in this place with him. His smile told her he knew what she was doing, the way his gaze sharpened told her he fought coming as well. A laugh caught her by surprise, and he smiled at her. "Price, I—"

She cried out when his thick finger penetrated her ass, stretching her anus in time with his thrusting cock. She tumbled hard and fast over the edge of orgasm, the walls of her sex closing on his dick in rhythmic contractions. Her nails dug into his shoulders as she rode out the hot waves of pleasure that threatened to drag her under. She wanted to see his face when he came.

He groaned, rolling his pelvis against hers. Aftershocks of orgasm rippled through her and her pussy tightened around him. His beautiful eyes lost focus, and his fingers worked inside her ass while he slammed his cock into her one more time. His breath hissed out, his come filling her. He shuddered against her, pulling her closer until his arms wrapped around her. A few moments passed while they both tried to catch their breath. He leaned back to look at her, a smile that was sinfully wicked curving his lips. He pushed his fingers deeper into her backside. "It occurs to me that I owe you a spanking."

The sound that emerged from her throat was half moan and half laugh. Just like that, she was hot and eager for him. Needy. This man got to her like nothing else ever had. "You did promise me. Time to pay up."

"I am a man of my word." He slid his cock and fingers out of her, wrapped his arm around her waist, and had her facedown on his lap before she could blink.

She tossed a sassy grin over her shoulder at him. Her heart pounded, and her hands shook so hard she had to bunch them in the sheets. The mere thought of his hand on her ass was enough to make her wet. She couldn't wait. "Give

me your best shot, Chief.”

“You’re in for it now, sugar.” He laughed and the sound wrapped around her heart, making her smile widen. Cupping his hand over her buttocks, he rubbed slow circles on her flesh that built her anticipation to a boiling point. She lifted her backside into his stroking palm and waited for the first strike to land. He didn’t disappoint her. The blow cracked loudly in the quiet room, the echo a shock that made her gasp. Heat and ecstatic pain flowed in the wake of the startling sound. He smacked her other cheek, and she moaned, rocking into his hand. Raining slaps that varied between punishing spanks and playful pats, he kept her off-guard. Dark pleasure wound tight within her, centering in her sex until her pussy clenched with every swat. She undulated on his lap, letting go of every ounce of control as she let him take her to a sweet, hot place that was pure sensation.

Moaning, she buried her face in the mattress, not sure how much more she could take before she begged him to fuck her. “P—Price, I need more.”

“God, sugar. You get me hard more often than a horny teenager.” He pulled her upright on his lap until she straddled his thighs, but faced away from him. The blunt tip of his cock probed her anus, and she threw her head back, bowing her neck over his shoulder as she arched in utter abandon. His arm circled her hips and pressed her down to take his painful penetration. But she was already beyond pleasure and pain, the two had become one, twisting together until all she wanted was *more*.

“*Oooh*.” She rocked herself against him, working herself slowly on his cock. Closing her eyes, she bit her lip and focused on the rising tide of sensation. He fitted his hands to her waist, lifting and lowering her, stretching her with each thrust. It was so good, so hot. His rougher flesh stimulated her swollen backside, his hard belly spanking against her ass as their movements picked up speed and force. The muscles in her thighs screamed with strain, sweat sliding down their bodies to seal their skin together where it touched.

She wrapped her fingers around his wrists, digging her nails in as she used her grip of leverage to quicken the pace. Each time he entered her ass, her sex throbbed. She could feel her orgasm building, coalescing into something sharp and shattering.

“Please,” she begged. She didn’t know what she pleaded for. For it to end. For it to never end.

“Aubrey.” His voice was ragged, his chest heaving, but his tone still managed to be reverent. He kissed the side of her neck. “Aubrey.”

Slipping one hand down, he flicked his fingertip over her clit. She sobbed, so close to orgasm she could taste its sweetness, but unable to move fast enough to push herself over the edge. He pulled her down tightly to him, grinding his pelvis against her punished ass. The penetration was deeper than any that had come before, widening her anus past bearing. God, it was so fucking good. Then he pinched her clit and bit the side of her neck. Hard.

She flipped over into orgasm so fast it left her gasping. Her ass closed around his cock, her pussy clenching on nothingness as he worked her clit and dragged her release out for as long as possible. He pumped into her ass over and over again, coming hard inside her, filling her with hot fluids that made her shudder.

Catching her as she collapsed against him, he rolled them until he lay on his back and she sprawled on his chest. She yawned, exhaustion sweeping through her, the emotional and sexual rollercoaster she’d been on taking its toll. Her heart tripped when he cuddled her close and brushed his lips across her forehead.

Her eyes closed, and she kissed his collarbone before sleep took her. Nothing had ever felt as good as this, been as achingly intense as this. Nothing. She never wanted this *feeling* to end. She just wanted to stay right here forever.

Split shifts sucked. She'd finally gotten permission from the building inspector to reopen Bean There, Done That, and business was booming since every cop and fireman in town now insisted on stopping by at least once a day. Price and Mason were a force to be reckoned with in Cedarville. She'd opened the shop that morning and now she had to close it down for the night. Owner or not, if a split shift had to be worked, it was usually her who did it. Her staff was trying to juggle hours until Susan got back on her feet. She was supposed to come in tomorrow. Thank God.

But finally six o'clock rolled around, and it was quitting time. Aubrey cleaned all the equipment, wiped down the counters and headed out the side door. Price had called to tell her something was up at work, and he'd be late. She frowned. While she was okay with work being important, a nagging worry went through her. Cedarville wasn't L.A., so the dangers of his job would be much less than if he still lived there, but bad things happened even in small towns. He'd promised her he'd be careful, and she had to trust that he would. Which was tough for her, but she did trust that he knew how to do his job. And that wasn't the only thing he knew how to do.

Post-coital bliss was the understatement of the century. Jesus, Price was great in bed. She didn't know if he was more skilled than any of her other lovers, or just the chemistry between them was better than she'd ever experienced before. Or both. Or...hell, she didn't really care so long as he kept her coming like clockwork. All. Night. Long.

A delicious shiver went down her spine. She could get used to this. She'd never clicked with anyone this deeply, this fast. It was terrifying and exhilarating and she knew she had the stupidest grin on her face and didn't even care, but it faded as quickly as it had formed.

The other worry she'd been suppressing all day came back to her in a rush now that she didn't have her own work to distract her. Price and she had had sex last night without a condom. And she hadn't dated anyone in almost a year, so she wasn't on the pill. Terror and panic should be careening through her...but they weren't. *That* was what freaked her out a little. It wasn't that she didn't want kids. She'd always wanted a couple of them before she'd gotten married, but the idea of breeding with Scott had always made her a little wary. He was a selfish man, she'd just never realized how selfish. Until it was over.

But...would having *Price's* child be that terrible? Well, she wasn't having a heart attack at the thought, and that said something right there. She was so wrapped up in her own thoughts, she didn't even notice Jericho until he grabbed her.

His fingers wrapped around her arms in a tight grip, desperation in his silver gaze. She'd never noticed before how brilliant the color of his eyes were. "You must save your soul mate. Now. You don't have a moment to lose, Aubrey." She stared at him. Creepy nutso boy was back.

"You have to believe, Aubrey. You have to believe in something."

Her heart gave a hard thump, and her worry for Price over his job came roaring back. Her stomach gave a vicious twist. So far Jericho hadn't been wrong. Not once. Did she really believe in what he said enough to go tearing across town in search of Price? And what if she didn't and something bad happened to him? Her chest squeezed tight, and for a moment she couldn't breathe. Something bad could happen to Price. Oh, God.

The truth slammed into her in one unholy wave of terror. She was in love with Price, and there was no way in hell she was taking any chances with his safety. She'd rather look insane running around town after him than let anything happen to him.

Jericho shook her hard. “14 Plumleigh Avenue, on the corner of Larkspur. Believe me, Aubrey. *Go!*”

She went, her legs and arms pumping as she raced across the square and over the five blocks to get to the address Jericho had given her. Her breath rasped out in painful pants. If this had to do with Price’s job, he would kill her for interfering. Did she care? Not really. He could kick her ass if it meant he was alive, breathing and healthy enough to get it done.

She skidded to a stop outside of 14 Plumleigh. The front window was broken out, the roof sagged on the porch, and the house looked as if it should be condemned. Her breath whooshed out in relief when she saw Price, alive and well, through the broken window. He wore a black bulletproof vest as he walked down a dark hallway toward the back of the house. She swallowed, blinking back tears.

Thank God, Jericho was wrong.

Through her tears she saw a slim man step into the hall behind Price. He wasn’t wearing a uniform and he carried a silver pistol. Her breath seized when he lifted the weapon to point it at Price’s unprotected head.

“Price, *behind you!*”

Both men spun toward her at the same time, guns raised. She dropped to the pavement and covered her head with her arms. The cement scraped the skin off her elbows and knees. Two deafening booms echoed over the quiet street, and she flinched, curling tighter into herself. Please, God, don’t let Price be hurt. Please, God, let her have warned him in time. Please, God. Please, God. *Please, God.*

Her ears buzzed, and her whole body shook as shock rocketed through her system. She needed to get up and check if Price was okay, but the message her brain was sending to her quivering muscles didn’t seem to be getting through. She panted against the cement, small rocks and dirt rubbing against her cheek.

“Aubrey.”

Relief flooded her system as she heard Price’s voice shout from a distance. A very far off distance. It sounded like he was yelling from the end of a long tunnel. Tingles broke down her arms as someone grabbed her and flipped her over. Price’s face hung over her, abject terror drawing the skin tight over his cheekbones. His big hands slid over her body in efficient movements. “Aubrey, are you hurt?”

“No, I’m fine.” Though her tone sounded vague and soft to her ears. She shook her head to try to clear it.

Swallowing, she laid a hand along his jaw. “Are *you* all right?”

“Hell, no. I’m not all right.” Molten rage flashed in his gaze and the muscles in his jaw clenched beneath her fingers. His hands shook as they brushed the dirt off her cheek. “What were you thinking yelling like that? It was crazy amounts of stupid.”

Matching anger whipped through her, stripping away the strange lethargy that weighed down her limbs. She pulled away from him and sat up, poking a finger into his chest. “I was thinking that I was saving you from getting shot. Excuse the hell out of me if that was *stupid*. My mistake.”

“That wasn’t what I—”

Pushing to her feet, she swayed a bit and he caught her against his chest. She wanted to stay there in his arms forever. Where they were both safe and okay. Her heart turned over, and she had to close her eyes. The anger drained away as quickly as it had come.

“Chief, I—” Another man spoke from behind her, but he cut himself off. “Never mind, I’ll ask Sergeant Barkum.” She blew out a breath and forced herself to step away from Price. “So, I’ll...um...see you tonight. If you have time,



of course.”

He sighed, reluctantly letting her go. “One of my men is going to have to ask you about what you saw and did.”

“Oh, fun.” She rolled her eyes to hide the tears of relief. “I just love doing police reports.”

Sergeant Barkum ended up taking her statement, and for once in her life, she lied to an officer of the law. What was she going to do? Tell them she had her own personal homeless oracle? She played the shocked, confused, didn’t-remember-a-thing card for all it was worth. She consoled her guilty conscience by reminding herself she’d done nothing illegal to find out Price was here and in danger.

When the sergeant finally finished with her, she turned to leave only to be drawn up short when Price called her name. He gave her an odd look. “Mrs. Chambers says she saw you running like a crazy woman through town. How were you going for a run down this street and just happened to see me?”

“I told the officer, I honestly don’t remember. I was at my shop and then I was here and then there were bullets.”

“You’re in sandals—not the best jogging shoes.”

“Look, I know it’s weird. But just trust me...it’s what I remember. I don’t know why I went running.” She laid a hand on his chest. “I don’t know why I came here, but I’m glad I did if you’re okay.”

“Aubrey...” Suspicion faded from his eyes, replaced by warmth. He tugged her into his arms, and she went. She didn’t even mind the bulletproof vest. This was exactly where she wanted to be.

“I’m sorry I don’t remember more.” *I’m sorry I have to lie so you don’t think I’m insane.* But would they believe that a vagabond prophet sent her to save the day? She wouldn’t in their place. Price was fine and that was all that mattered. She’d play the amnesiac if she had to. Maybe on their fiftieth wedding anniversary, she’d tell him the truth about what happened today. Fifty sounded like a nice round number to her.

“I love you, Aubrey.”

“I love you too.” Taking a breath, she pulled back to look him in the eyes. She loved the way they crinkled at the corners when he smiled at her. “Price—”

“Yeah, sugar?”

“Will you marry me?”

He blinked. “Yes.”

“That’s it?”

“What’s it?”

“Just yes? No questions or doubts or...anything?” He’d been saying he wanted to marry her since their first date—or was it technically their second date? She had no idea—but after more time around her, she’d figured he’d need some serious convincing. Scott had—she shut down that line of thinking. If there was one thing she knew, it was that Scott would never be a fraction of the man Price was. No more comparing them.

“Not one.” He slid his fingers into the pocket of his slacks and pulled out a ring with a sapphire surrounded by diamonds. “I’ve been carrying this thing around for weeks.” He grinned, and it was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. “We should get married in the park, what do you think?”

Tears welled up in her eyes, and all she could do was nod. He slid the ring on her finger and then lifted her hand to his lips, turned it over, and kissed her palm. “I love you.”

“I know it.” He smiled. “I love you too, sugar.”

And she believed him.

She had to thank Jericho.

Price wanted her to go back to his place and wait for him there. She would, but not until she tracked down Jericho and thanked him up one side and down the other. Cold sweat broke out on her forehead when she thought about what might have happened to Price if Jericho hadn't sent her to save him. Where was he? Jericho was always sitting on the park bench across from her coffee shop. Always. His butt had been glued there for months now.

She jogged up to the bench to find his sign leaning up against it. But no Jericho. Shading her eyes, she looked up and down the block. Maybe he needed to use the john, and he'd be right back. Fifteen minutes later, she was sitting in his usual spot. Nothing. He was never away from the bench this long, and a twist of worry cramped her belly. Where was he? Glancing down at the sign, she saw a hand-written note scrawled in the corner. *What the hell?*

Picking up the sign, she brought it up to her nose so she could read it. Underneath the huge words "The End is Near" was *Gone to save another lost soul, Your Guardian Angel.*

She choked on a laugh, but for the third time in one day, she believed.

## About the Author

Crystal Jordan began writing romance after she finished graduate school and needed something to fill the hours that used to be eaten away by homework. Currently, she serves as a librarian at a university in California, but has lived and worked all over the United States. She writes paranormal, futuristic and erotic romance.

To learn more about Crystal please visit [www.crystaljordan.com](http://www.crystaljordan.com). Send an email to Crystal at [crystal@crystaljordan.com](mailto:crystal@crystaljordan.com) or join her Yahoo! group to join in the fun with other readers as well as Crystal! <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/crystal-jordan>

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*One amazing night. A waste of time? Or a new beginning?*

## Fortune's Promise

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### *A Fortune Story*

After winning the lottery a year ago with her two best friends, Maddie Carpenter's life should have changed for the better. Right? Wrong. She's still stuck in her boring old life while her friends are living theirs to the fullest. Watching one of them get married brings all her self doubt into sharp focus. She resolves to do something exciting, something thrilling. Starting right now, with the singer performing at the reception. Tanner is still bitter over his divorce, bitter toward women in general. But something about sweet and sexy Maddie turns Tanner inside out—and he can't resist her. One amazing night of sex turns into many nights of more amazing sex. Soon their relationship is moving way out of the casual zone. But both carry excess baggage of suspicion and distrust that could cost them everything...

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Fortune's Promise:*

The tiny hairs on the back of his neck stood on end, and he sat up straight, aware someone was watching him. He turned around to see a woman standing in the wide entryway of the bar, backlit from the bright lights coming from the hallway of the hotel, her curvaceous figure silhouetted perfectly for his perusal. He cocked his head, appreciating her voluptuous form, wishing he could make out her face. He waited, anticipation filling his gut and he damn near prayed she would walk inside the bar. She finally did, taking tentative steps, the skirt of her pale gold dress swirling around her feet as she entered the dark room. He recognized her immediately. The hot little piece who had caught his eye when he performed at the reception. The one who had stood in the corner and watched him with wide eyes the entire time he sang. The bridesmaid. There'd only been two and Brittney had told him all three of them had won the lottery along with her. She could work. Her gaze scanned the room slowly, chewing nervously on her lower lip as she came closer to the bar. Just the sight of those even white teeth nibbling on the lush fullness of her pink lower lip had his mind conjuring all kinds of images. All of them dirty, all of them sure to shock the shit out of this chick. She had a regal way about her, reminding him vaguely of an ice princess. The tilt of her chin, the almost haughty expression on her face, the way she walked with perfect posture and graceful movements. Tanner wondered what she would do if he propositioned her, whispered in her ear that he wanted to fuck her brains out.

Hell, he was in a mood. Not only did he want to get laid, but he also wanted to do it in every dirty nasty way imaginable. Little Miss Prim and Proper would put a lockdown on her panties if she had any clue as to what he was thinking about.

Maybe she wouldn't work.

She finally ended up at the bar, a few seats away from him and she sat, pulling up at her skirts as she did. It didn't help, he noticed. The bodice of her strapless dress slipped, revealing the delicate pale lace of her bra for the briefest second before she yanked it back up. She glanced around, her gaze meeting his and her eyes widened in shock. She had caught him watching every moment.

He smiled at her and she looked away, her cheeks flushing a deep pink. The bartender ignored her when she tried to gain her attention with a wave of her hand and her shoulders slumped. Resting her hand on the countertop, she looked utterly defeated.

Tanner cleared his throat when the bartender approached and she smiled at him, the look on her face flirtatious. "You ignored her."

"Who?" Her eyes widened and she glanced up and down the bar. "Oh, you mean her? I'll get to her in a minute. I thought *you* might need something."

He certainly didn't need her. "I want you to go over there and take her order. And tell her it's on me."

The bartender nodded, the light dimming in her eyes. Maybe she realized he wasn't interested. *Damn right.* "Of course, Mr. Robinson."

She walked over to the bridesmaid, pointing a finger at Tanner halfway through her spiel. When the bartender turned away to prepare her drink, the bridesmaid glanced in his direction, a tentative smile on her lips. He smiled back, and she looked away, her cheeks pink again.

Tanner grabbed his drink and slid off the stool, walking slowly towards her. She didn't notice, too busy gathering her drink from the now-jealous bartender who glared at him as he approached.

She sipped from her drink, her lips wrapped around the skinny red straw, and he knew without a doubt that she was the one who could help him ease his troubles tonight.

Now if only she would be willing.

He sat on the stool next to her and she literally jumped, turned her startled dark brown gaze upon him, her lips still attached to the straw. She gulped loudly and set the glass down with a thump, a nervous smile on her face.

"Thank you." She waved at the glass. "For my drink. You didn't have to do that."

"You're welcome." He tilted his head towards her, wondered what made this woman so damn nervous. Most of the women he encountered fawned over him but didn't necessarily act nervous. No, they were more the type who knew what they wanted and went right for it.

A free night in the sack with the famous singer, that's what they always wanted.

He grimaced. Fuck, when did his life get so pointless? So empty?

She must have noticed his grimace because she frowned, even looked ready to hop off her stool. "I'm sorry, I'll leave you alone."

Without thinking, he rested his hand on her forearm to prevent her from leaving. The tips of his fingers sizzled at the contact, sending a jolt of awareness throughout his entire body. She appeared affected as well, gooseflesh blossoming

on her skin beneath his touch.

“Don’t go,” he murmured. “Stay with me, just for a few minutes.”

She settled herself on the stool and he removed his hand reluctantly.

“Did you enjoy it?”

*He’s throwing a kink—or two—in her plans...*

## Educating Jane Porter

© 2009 *Dominique Adair*

### *A Jane Porter Story*

Last night Jane met the Master of her dreams...

Tall, dark and very Spanish, Antonio Villareal is a lover unlike any Jane has ever known—undeniably sexy and more than willing to help her explore her submissive side. To find a master who’s a natural dominant is one thing. But kind and considerate, as well? She can hardly believe her good fortune.

Antonio is well aware that Jane is determined to keep their sexual relationship temporary. But he has a different plan in mind.

In the morning he introduces her to his best friend...

*Enjoy the following excerpt for Educating Jane Porter:*

“I’m very pleased to meet you, Jane.”

His voice was smooth, cultured like a fine brandy or the perfect cigar. When he assumed the chair next to her, his scent, a mixture of lime and healthy male, tickled her senses.

This man was hot, really hot. She’d never considered going to bed with another man so quickly after bedding Antonio, but—

When she became aware both men were giving her a curious look, she cleared her throat.

“Uh...it’s lovely to meet you too.”

Santos flashed her a smile that was both amused and pleased.

*You’re acting like a complete hick.*

“So what brings you...uh...here, this weekend?” Inwardly she groaned. Of course he was here for Antonio’s birthday. They were friends.

Santos’s brown eyes twinkled. He took her hand and raised it to his lips.

“My friend told me the women were exquisite.”

His lips touched her skin, igniting a quick flash of heat. When his tongue touched her knuckle she shivered.

*Wow.*

She didn’t miss the glance the men shared. Her sex clenched.

“Isn’t she as beautiful as I described?” Antonio slid into the chair directly opposite Santos. Between the two of them they’d effectively pinned her in the corner of the terrace.

“That she is.”

“Blonde, elegant, confident.” Antonio’s hand slid under the table to settle on her left knee. “What more could a man ask for?”

“I don’t know if I’m all that.” Under the stare of both men, her cheeks heated.

“You are, and much more.” Antonio’s smile was intimate. He gave her knee a gentle squeeze and a warm ribbon of heat unfurled in her stomach.

“You’re making her blush.” Santos sounded amused.

“I enjoy making beautiful women blush.”

Her lover’s hand slid up the inside of her thigh pushing her skirt along with it. She sent a silent thank you to Kitten for requesting full-length tablecloths. Whatever he was up to, no one would be able to see under the table.

Antonio gently pressed his hand against the inside of her leg indicating his desire. Reaching for her glass, she opened her legs several inches.

“It appears you do it well,” Santos spoke.

Another hand touched her right knee, and she started. Her gaze flew to Santos’s face, but he wasn’t looking at her. A waiter approached with them with three bowls on a tray.

“As you ordered, *Señor Santos*.”

“Thank you, Ramon. The sun is warm, and this will be much appreciated.”

Ramon placed the first bowl in front of Jane.

“I hope you like lime,” Santos said. “I took the liberty of ordering for you.”

“Why yes, thank you.”

In unison, their hands slid further up the insides of her thighs, gently tugging them apart. Jane snatched her spoon as the waiter completed his service. He left with a slight bow.

Antonio’s hand squeezed her upper thigh. Santos’s hand moved upward and without thinking, she spread her legs. His pinky nudged her mound, and a rush of liquid filled her pussy.

“The flavor is exquisite.” Antonio spooned a small amount of his peach gelato and offered it to Jane. “You’ll find this to be a singular experience.”

Though she wasn’t entirely sure he was speaking to her, she obediently opened her mouth. The creamy substance landed on her tongue bringing with it the cool taste of peaches and cream.

Santos’s fingers nudged her pussy.

“It is most pleasant.”

Her gaze flew to his face. He was watching her with an odd little smile. His finger parted the slick lips of her pussy to delve inside. Electricity shot through her body when he touched her clit.

*There is a stranger with his hand on your crotch!*

Panic overtook her and from deep in her throat, Jane squealed. When she slammed her legs shut, she wasn’t entirely sure if it was to keep him out or to hold him hostage.

“There is a shy quality to this dish.” Antonio was speaking. “But if you savor the flavor, absorbing every nuance of its sweetness, it’s well worth the effort.”

Hell, they weren’t talking about the gelato...

“Yes, I see your point,” Santos murmured. Scooping up a small bite of raspberry gelato, he offered it to her.

“You will enjoy it, I promise you,” he said.

Her stomach dropped. This was the moment. Santos wanted an invite into her bed. Her gaze darted to Antonio. "I assure you, it is a flavor you must try." His smile deepened. "The experience will change your world." Their hands on her thighs exerted enough pressure to alert her to their intentions. Need burned low, hot in her pussy. Her nipples ached with the need to be touched, sucked. She wanted both of these men. Jane opened her mouth to accept the bite. Cool raspberry delighted her tongue even as she relaxed her thighs. Spreading them wide, she gave them entry to her darkest desires. "Pleasing, is it not?" Santos asked. She couldn't even enjoy the bite because their hands were perched at the top of her inner thighs. At the first touch of her clit, Jane swallowed the bite. At the second stroke, her hips thrust forward. "It's lovely." Her voice was shrill to her own ears. Quickly spooning a bite of her gelato, she stuffed it into her mouth. "Soft, creamy. It's perfection." Santos stroked her clit. "Sweeter than candy. I think we should indulge as much as possible before the party tonight," Antonio said. "It has been a while since I've indulged my love of sweet cream." A finger prodded her vagina. Her breath caught, and she was penetrated. A second finger joined the first, stretching her. Delicate nerves leapt to life sending a gush of liquid need into her pussy. Her grip on the spoon tightened, and her knuckles turned white. Judging by the angle, it was Antonio who was finger-fucking her under the table. Her nipples hardened, creating tiny points against her thin sweater. Fighting the urge to caress them, she took another bite of the gelato. The creamy dessert was melting under the warm sun, much like she was under the table. From the right, a finger touched her clit. Her hips shot forward in a silent plea for more. A bite of peach gelato appeared in front of her, and she licked it from the spoon. Antonio's greedy fingers in her pussy began to thrust while Santos stroked her clit. Antonio leaned toward her, and his lips brushed her cheek. "I'm going to eat your pussy, Beauty." A whimper slipped from her lips. Her gaze was focused on her dessert bowl, now filled with green cream. "And then, after you come against my tongue, I'm going to put my cock into your hungry pussy and fuck you until you come again." Explicit images crashed through her mind...her naked body, both men feasting on her flesh. Two cocks, thrusting, thrusting... A sharp pinch on one nipple was all it took. Antonio caught her chin and pulled her toward him. His mouth took possession of hers stifling her cry. Their tongues mated as her orgasm whipped through her body. The whole situation was so carnal, so explosive. Jane was rocked to her very core. The spasms eased, and so did the kiss. His mouth gentled, and his fingers in her pussy did the same. They removed their hands leaving her feeling empty, shattered. Antonio broke the kiss. "You pleased me very much, Beauty." She ducked her head, and he slid his arm around her waist then pulled her against his side. With the taste of Antonio



thick on her tongue, she peeked up at Santos.

His gaze was direct, hot. Her eyes widened when he raised his left hand to his lips. His tongue slipped out to taste her cream, and his gaze turned fierce.

“That was quite enjoyable.” Antonio was speaking to Santos. “Aren’t you glad you took my advice and indulged this morning?”

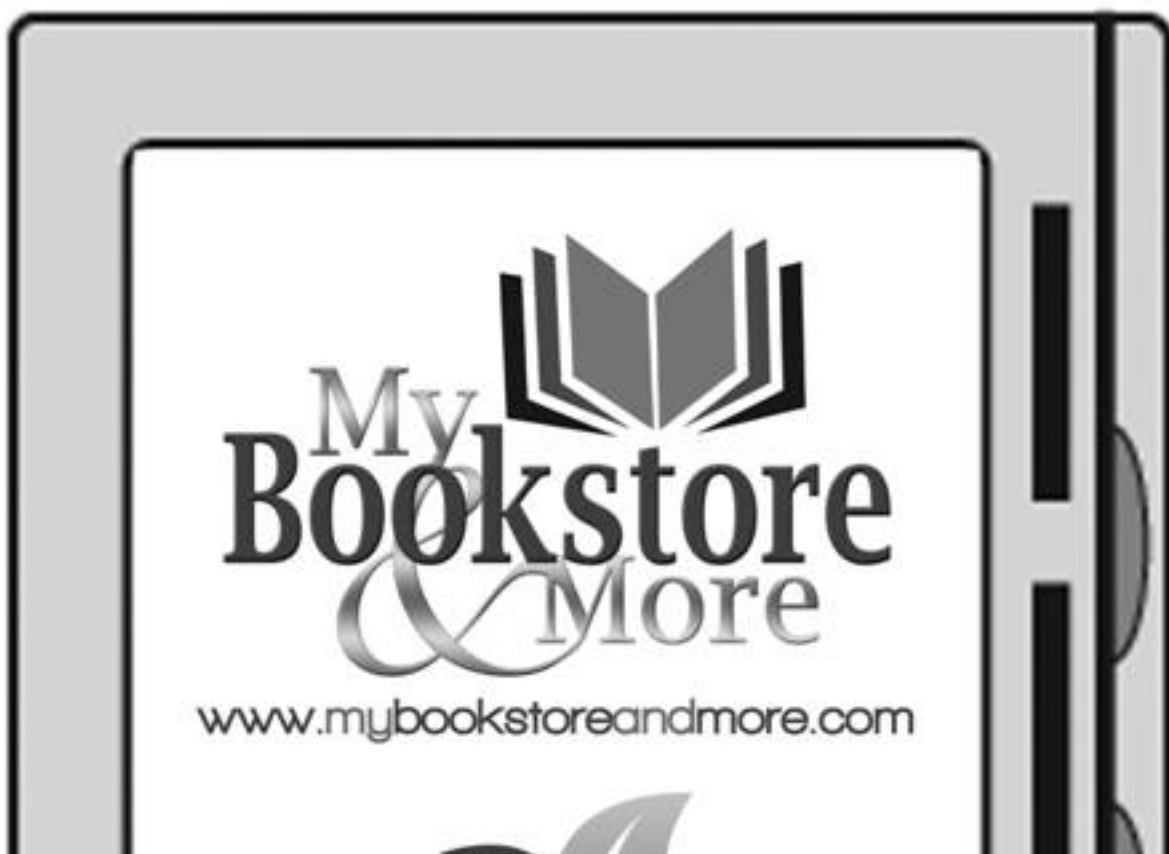
“It was unforgettable.”

Santos’s gaze burned into her flesh, and she looked away. Just thinking about what they’d done under the table was enough to cause her heart to flutter. She’d just allowed two men, virtual strangers, to finger her under a table.

In public.

A rush of yearning moved through her body. Exhibitionism was a secret fantasy of hers, one she’d felt destined to remain unfulfilled. Her pussy clenched. Now, she wasn’t quite so sure.

“I don’t know about you, Antonio, but I’d like to taste more.” Santos tossed his napkin on the table. “Shall we move our tasting upstairs?”





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