



Damaged by Loribelle Hunt

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Chapter One

Two a.m. Thank God, the torture was almost over. She only had one thing on her mind: escape. Well, there might have been a man on her mind too. An impossibly dark and hot and enigmatic man whom she couldn't have.

The wedding reception was finally winding down. There were only a few stragglers left, and Nancy motioned to the bartender, who was standing next to her, to issue the last call. He did and handed her a glass of champagne. She shouldn't accept it. She'd already had more than a couple in the last few hours, but what the hell? Her head might protest in the morning, but she'd survive it. She frowned into the glass before taking a long swallow. There were other things in her life that hadn't been nearly as easy to survive as a hangover.

After taking another swallow, she set the half-empty glass down and smiled her thanks to the barkeep. She'd smiled so much tonight her face felt frozen into that position. She walked into the remaining crowd, subtly but clearly letting it be known the party was over.

About an hour's drive east of Panama City, Bank's Crossing was a small beach community in the Florida Panhandle. Most of the reception's guests would walk home, and a couple of the gutsier men asked if she needed someone to walk her. She declined those offers with a smile and shake of her head, and they left quickly. Much as she wanted to take credit, she knew it belonged to the man watching from the shadows.

Him again.

Silent. Impossibly still. And always, always expressionless. Except when he met her gaze, as he did now. She couldn't repress a shiver. His face didn't change, but his eyes... She wasn't sure what she was reading in them, only knew that it scared her as much as it excited her. Hot, territorial, possessive? How could those black eyes be described? The only thing she knew for sure was she *not* getting involved with another man like that.

Jessalyn thought she was overreacting. She thought that Brad Moore was harmless. Nancy snorted. Jessalyn was out of her damned mind. But Nancy couldn't blame her old friend. She'd been married earlier in the evening to a man she'd loved for years, stayed one hour at her own reception, and then left with her new husband to catch a flight to Jamaica. She'd let the remainder of the reception in the hands of the maid of honor—i.e., Nancy—and best man Brad Moore, her new husband's recently returned brother.

Brad was a mystery Nancy didn't want to delve into. She knew more than she wanted to already. He'd gone to college before going into the Army. He'd been gone sixteen years, not long enough to get retirement, she thought, but the rumor was he'd been badly injured in Iraq. Bad enough to justify an early retirement in the Army's eyes. She got the feeling he didn't see it quite the same way. That made him what? Thirty-eight? Something like that. Five years older than her. She'd done the older man thing before too, though she secretly conceded five years wasn't a difference worth noting. It just gave her another handy excuse to ignore him.

He was still watching her, and she couldn't stand it. Her skin felt hot. Tight. The satin bodice of her dress should have been cool and soft against her nipples. Instead the fabric rasped over her the way she imagined his calloused hands would. The rings weren't helping. When he looked at her, her nipples hardened into painful points, and the metal that pierced and circled them seemed tighter each time. He was making her crazy and he hadn't done a damned thing.

She felt like she was going to combust. Because as much as he scared her, he also turned her on. She could admit that to herself. Privately

at least. It was time to get the hell out of Dodge before she got crazy and acted on the impulse to approach him. To beg him to take her to bed and fuck her with the same intensity he looked at her with. *No, no, no. Nancy, you don't want that, remember?* Been there. Done that. Ended badly.

She had to get out quick. Her dress was marvelous, she had to give Jessalyn credit for that, since she'd seen some really horrendous bridesmaid dresses over the years. It was a dark blue that showed off her tan and blonde hair, floor length, strapless with an empire waist. It came with a three-quarter-sleeved jacket, cut off under her breasts, that hid most of her tattoos during the wedding. She'd taken it off a few hours ago when the older residents, the ones most likely to find body art tacky or offensive, had left. She was a walking advertisement for her profession as a tattoo artist. She wasn't ashamed of her body or her art, but she didn't see much point in causing unnecessary conflict with it.

Retrieving the jacket and her tiny purse—the caterers would take care of the cleanup—she hurried for the door. And almost made it. She didn't have to turn around to know the big tanned hand that pressed against her stomach, freezing her in place, was Brad's. She'd spent weeks fascinated by his hands.

"Where are you going?" he asked in a deep, masculine voice that unnerved her as much as the heat from his palm. He stood right behind her, his broad chest barely touching her back. She didn't turn around.

"Home. It's been a long day." One that had started early in the morning then gone late into the night, and she had to go to work in a few hours.

"Dance with me first," he demanded.

She sucked in a breath. She shouldn't do that. Let him pull her close, press his body against hers. How could she resist then? Hadn't he been pursuing her subtly, with a truckload of restraint, for weeks? Like he was afraid of scaring her off? Was that really what was going on? She could be completely, totally wrong. The attraction she felt, the crazy pull she felt towards him, could be absolutely one sided, but she couldn't take the risk. There was something so resolute about him. He'd never let a woman he wanted go, and she didn't ever want to be with a man like that

again.

"There's no music," she answered when she finally found her voice again.

He shifted closer to her. She could feel the heat of his body against her, his warm breath blowing against the back of her neck. "Who needs it?"

She wanted to say no. She almost said no. But there was the faintest hint of defenselessness in his voice that she found impossible to resist. She nodded and he took her hand, pulled her back towards the center of the room. She watched the floor as they walked, afraid and excited at the same time. A man she'd barely spoken to in years shouldn't make her feel this way. It had been years since anyone had. Two *years* since she'd had sex or wanted to. She shoved that thought away. She wasn't doing that tonight either, and definitely not with this guy. It was just a dance. One dance and she'd flee.

He must have made a deal with the band, because as soon as they reached the dance floor and he pulled her into his arms, they struck up a slow, sultry ballad. He held her close when she would have preferred distance, but she laid her head against his chest anyway, over his heart. Heard it hammering fast and remembered what it was like to trust a man. He didn't touch her suggestively, kept his hands in the free and clear, but there was no ignoring the erection pressed against her belly. There was no ignoring the desire that wound through her. She sighed. She was so screwed. Well, hopefully. If he propositioned her now, she knew she wouldn't say no. The song ended and another didn't start up. He kept her close, still swaying to music only imagined, and whispered in her ear.

"Come home with me."

Here it was. Decision time. Go? Run? Ignore the only man who'd turned her on in forever, or take one night? Because surely it would be only one night. He looked at her with that hot something in his eyes, but he treated her with chilly disdain. They were not compatible. They both knew it. She made a split-second decision and hoped it wouldn't come back to bite her in the ass. Nodding, she retreated from the warmth of his arms.

“Let’s go then.”

Chapter Two

The reception had been held at the Tropical, a large restaurant on the beach with a huge deck area. It was only a couple of blocks from the cottage he'd recently started calling home, so he'd left his car there after the wedding and walked over.

He took a deep breath when they stepped outside. He'd spent the last few weeks doing that, was surprised on his return to discover how much he'd missed the smell of the Gulf. The steady roar of it in his ears. He didn't take the time to savor it now, however. There was a different kind of roaring going on in his ears. Blood rushing in anticipation.

He held onto Nancy's hand and walked towards his place in silence, terrified she'd change her mind when they passed her house. Or worse, when she was inside his. He figured that was the ultimate test. Once she accepted his offer and came inside, if she changed her mind it might take more willpower than he had to let her go.

That would be a horrible position for both of them to find themselves in. He may have been gone for the last sixteen years, except for the occasional leave, but he knew what went down in his absence. Shane kept him informed. So he knew Nancy had been married to a real piece of work. Knew he'd nearly beat her to death after she'd divorced him, knew he'd turned that rage on Jessalyn and blown up her house. Too bad Jessie had killed him. Brad would love to be able to go back now and take care of that for Nancy. He actually felt cheated out of being the one to do the deed.

Damaged. They were both incredibly damaged.

On top of that, the woman was definitely not his type. He preferred long, lean brunettes who didn't alter their bodies by surgical or other means. Or he had. But in the nine weeks since he'd returned to Bank's Crossing, he'd found not one brunette who turned his head. Not one woman with clear, unadulterated skin he wanted to roll in the sheets with. His dreams were haunted by a curvy tattooed blonde who left him in heart-stopping wakefulness. Hot and hard and unsatisfied. Whatever this was between them, no one else was going to scratch the itch.

They turned up the walk in silence and he paused at the door, hand on the handle. "Last chance to say no, Nancy."

She licked her bottom lip, sucked it between her teeth, and he nearly groaned aloud. "You got a beer in there?"

He knew his eyes narrowed, his expression closed, because she startled. But she didn't back down, and he was inexplicably proud of her for that. She had her demons, but she was dealing with them. He could relate to that. He could respect it.

"How much did you drink tonight?" he asked, trying to make it sound like teasing though he was out of practice. He needed to know. He didn't want her to have any excuses in the morning.

She smiled. Her first real smile for him, and he couldn't begin to explain the funny thing that curve of her lips did to his heart. It shouldn't be legal.

"Not so much that I'm not fully aware of what I'm doing, Moore. But liquid courage..." She let the thought trail off and shrugged. "You know."

He nodded—he did know—and opened the door. Maybe he could use some of that himself. Despite popular opinion, soldiers weren't getting laid every time they were home, and he found the older he got the pickier he got. He wanted something more interesting, more lasting, that a fling on leave. Pulling two beers out of the fridge, he tried to ignore a surge of bitterness and regret. The Army was done with him. It was time to start a new life. Nancy lifted the bottle to her mouth, and he suddenly knew this wasn't the way to do it. He reached out and stopped her.

“Don’t,” he said softly. “I don’t want you using that as an excuse later. For going to bed with me.”

She hesitated a moment before setting the bottle on his tiny kitchen table, but then she moved away from him. Crossing her arms under her breasts, the action pushing them up, she met his gaze for the first time in what seemed like hours. His mouth watered at the sight. Her eyes were as fascinating as the ink that disappeared into the dress on her chest and back. He wanted to see it all. To explore it all. He’d never found tattoos appealing, was one of the few people he knew in the service who didn’t have at least one, but hers left him transfixed every time he got a glimpse.

He could tell she was thinking about it. Her eyes were dark, dark blue, and he’d discovered over the weeks they went that shade when she was deep in her own mind. She turned her back on him, and he had to order his feet to stay still. The urge to move forward and examine the cherry blossoms across her shoulders, with his lips, was overwhelming.

For the first time he wondered exactly how bad the abuse had been. She was so strong, so together. He knew, he’d made it his business to know, there were no police reports. No accusations of abuse until the divorce trial and then the obvious attack that couldn’t be denied.

“How bad was it?” he asked softly. He needed to know. Had the bastard “just” beaten her? Or worse?

“What?” She looked over her shoulder, confusion in her eyes, but she didn’t turn all the way around to face him.

“Your husband? That relationship. How bad was it, Nancy? What do I need to know?” What did he need to know to not hurt her. To not trip any hidden emotional landmines.

She smiled before turning back to study the wallpaper. “Nothing like that. Nothing that awful.”

Nothing like rape. Neither one of them said the word, but they were both thinking it.

It felt like hours before she turned back to face him, though he knew it had only been seconds. Her chin tilted defiantly in the air, and he knew she wasn’t going to let her past rule her. Not tonight at least. He was so proud he didn’t know how he managed to bite back a smile. She was

magnificent.

"One night," she said. "That's it. No dating. No casual fuck buddy kind of relationship later."

Hell, that was what he wanted, right? To touch her, taste her. Get her out of his system and go back to what was familiar. Then why did his stomach twist into knots, his whole body tense and rebel at the thought? He suspected one night was not going to be nearly enough. But it was what she was offering, and hell, after she saw the scars she may decide she didn't even want one night.

That gave him a moment's pause. No woman had seen the shrapnel and burn scars on his back and side. He'd even started to think they'd healed enough to cover with a tattoo. An alien idea for him. If he did that, he wanted her to do it, wanted her to design it, wanted her in charge of the needle that engraved it on his skin. But right now, at this moment, he had to decide if he could live with just one night. And wasn't that fucked up? Wasn't it usually the other way around? But maybe he could use her one night to convince her to try more. It was the only solution he could come up with. He wanted her too much to walk away now.

"One night," he agreed, though he knew he had no intention of living up to that agreement.

Her eyes went dark again, and he suspected she didn't believe him, but she didn't call him on it. "Where's the bedroom?"

His heart hammered in his chest. This was it. "This way," he said, stepping forward and taking her hand, leading her down the hall to the one bedroom.

It was a simple room. The only light source, a floor lamp on the other side of the bed, was currently unlit. Enough light came through the window to see by, so he didn't move to turn it on. There wasn't enough furniture to worry about tripping over anything in the dark. He only had a dresser and a king-sized bed that almost filled the space. She freed her hand, moved to sit on it and pulled the dress up enough to expose her feet.

"Leave them on," he ordered when she reached for the strap

around her ankle.

He approached and sank to his knees. Wrapping his hand around the back of her calf, he lifted her foot and kissed the exposed skin on the inside curve. She shivered. He could feel the air-conditioning vent blowing cool air above them. He looked up her body, stopping at her face.

"Are you cold?" He'd warm her up soon enough if she was.

"No."

She was turned on though. Her nipples were hard points he could see through her dress. He smiled.

"You wear the sexiest shoes," he whispered, looking back down. It'd driven him crazy all day trying to get a glimpse of these. They were dark blue, almost black. Like midnight. A thin band crossed her toes, but there was a full heel section and then the strap across the top of her foot. The heels had to be four inches. Sexy.

He tugged her to stand, then moved behind her and slowly pulled her zipper down, almost as anxious to expose all of the tattoo on her back as to see the rest of her. She wasn't wearing a bra, and when the zipper reached her hips he saw the tiny strip of a thong. He didn't even try to repress his groan of pleasure, ran his fingers lightly over the ink now exposed to his gaze. But it wasn't enough. He had to see the rest. He moved around to her front, let her bend, step out of her dress and walk away to lay it carefully over the top of the dresser. When she turned back to face him, the uncertainty was easy to read on her face.

"You're beautiful," he said, drinking her in, and that smile lit her face again. She was going to give him a heart attack. He held out a hand. "C'mere."

She arched an eyebrow. "You need to catch up first."

He'd already loosened the tux's bowtie and opened the top button that felt so constrictive around his neck. The tie ends hung free around his collar and he pulled it off, then slipped the remaining buttons free, but left the shirt on. He toed his shoes off, unsnapped his trousers and pushed them off, sitting on the edge of the bed to pull off his socks, and then, finally she approached. She stepped between his legs and stopped just inches from pressing against him. Damn, he wanted her pressed tight

against him. Under him. Moving with him. Not reaching out and grabbing her was murder.

As if she sensed his struggle, she paused. His heart slammed in his chest at her slight hesitation. He couldn't wait. He had to touch her. He tried to keep his grip gentle as he pulled her down, but when she straddled him, when her pussy came into contact with his cock, even through his underwear and her thong the sensation was so intense, such a turn-on, his fingers flexed.

He almost withdrew at her gasp, but one look at her face and he knew it wasn't a protest of pain. If he wasn't careful he'd bruise her. He forced his hands to relax a bit, but he didn't let her go.

Then, God help him, she moved, tilting her hips closer, pressing her sex closer, and she grabbed his shoulders and sighed when his muscles contracted under her touch. She started to slide the shirt from his shoulders, and he knew he should stop her. Warn her so the scars wouldn't be too big of a shock. But she leaned forward, brushed her lips against his. Then his tongue was in her mouth and there was no way in hell he was stopping this now.

She got the shirt off and her hands were back on his skin, first at his shoulders then gliding down his chest. Palms flat, fingers splayed wide, she stroked him, seemed not to miss even one inch of skin. He tensed, but there was no hesitation when her fingertips passed over the rougher skin on his side.

Her certainty was the last permission he'd been waiting for, and he finally released his grip on her hips. Finally let himself free to explore the woman he'd been fantasizing about for weeks. And what a woman.

She didn't have the lean, flat build of someone who starved herself or worshipped at the altar of exercise, but she wasn't weak or too soft either. Her quads bunched under his hands when he touched them. Her hamstrings flexed when he wrapped his hands under them and encouraged her to wrap her legs around his waist. Once she did, he flipped them so she was on her back with him leaning over her. Her gasp filled his mouth, and he let her break the kiss.

"I want to see you," he whispered.

The moonlight streaming through the windows wasn't enough for him to see the details tattooed on her skin. He reached over and pulled the string to turn on the floor lamp, forgetting before it was too late he didn't really want her to get as good a look at him as he would of her. He worried for nothing. She never looked away from his face.

"Like what you see?" Her voice was husky, her arousal evident in the hard nipples that riveted his attention.

How had he missed that gleam of metal through them earlier? What would they taste like? What would they feel like against his tongue? He bent his head, determined to find out. He didn't start at the prize though. No, he wanted to savor this experience. To draw it out enough to drive them both crazy with desire. Hell, who was he fooling? He was already crazy; she needed to catch up.

He kissed the rose between her breasts, then used his tongue to follow a tattooed vine that led from the flower to wrap underneath one firm globe, winding its way to disappear around her back. But no, he wasn't exploring that yet. Later, he promised himself. Instead he moved to the flowers on her shoulder, followed them, sometimes kissing, sometimes with small nips, down over her collarbone, her breastbone. Her legs were still wrapped around his waist and when he finally reached the inside swell of breast, her heels dug into his back in an unspoken command. He was a good soldier. He obeyed.

He took her nipple into his mouth, rolled his tongue over it, savoring the sweet taste of her skin mixed with the tang of the metal piercing. She moaned, ground her pussy against him, and though he knew he should slow down, it just egged him on. He reached between them, found the strap of the flimsy lacy thong, and ripped it free. She moaned when his fingers brushed over her. Or maybe that was him. He wasn't sure he cared. He had to touch to her, to feel her.

He slid one finger into her pussy, slowly, not sure how long it had been for her. If she would be so tight he'd have to go slower than he wanted. He worried for nothing. She was wet. Her cunt clenched around his finger, pulled as if to hold him tightly inside her. When he brushed his thumb over her clit, she started to tremble. Her breathing quickened into

soft moans that fascinated him. God, she was close to coming. She responded so beautifully to his touch, but he wanted to be inside her when she came.

Somehow he yanked his underwear off without changing positions and then he was inside her, gritting his teeth against the urge to drive into her over and over again. He'd come much too quickly that way. Her eyes snapped open before he could move anyway.

"Condom," she whispered.

Fuck. He never made mistakes like that. What the hell had he been thinking? Thank God, one of them still had a couple working brain cells. Part of him rebelled at that idea. He wanted her mindless with need, with lust. Not thinking.

"Don't move."

She chuckled. "Don't worry, I won't."

He sat on the edge of the bed, fished his wallet out of his trouser pockets, grabbed the condom, and was covered in seconds. He held his breath when he turned back to her. It wasn't a joke. She hadn't moved an inch. She looked like a fallen angel. Lying back against his pillows, blonde hair spread around her. He'd kissed off her siren's red lipstick. He focused on that a second before his gaze traveled down her body. Her legs splayed wide as he'd left her, her pussy was exposed to his view. Pink and glistening with the cream he'd coaxed from her body. Inviting. Tantalizing.

Change of plans. He needed one quick taste before he fucked her. Moving back between her legs, he slid down her body until his head was between her thighs. He'd never been a big fan of oral sex and only performed it when it was reciprocated. He had the feeling that was fixing to change.

He spread the lips of her pussy. Exposed her clit. It was a tiny hard ball. He leaned closer to lick it, suck it gently between his teeth. It was like touching a live wire. Just like that she was coming, her body shaking with the force of it as she cried out.

He *had* to feel that around his cock. He moved back up her body, the head of his cock nudging her pussy.

"I don't think I can do slow and gentle right. Maybe later," he whispered hoarsely.

"Who said I wanted slow and gentle?" she whispered, sounding soft and sated.

She didn't finish the question before he was thrusting into her, leaning down to suck one of her nipples into his mouth. He kept his thrusts short and shallow, wanting her pleasure to build again. He needed her to enjoy this just as much as he was. Enough that she would want to repeat the experience over and over again and then some more. Because once was sure as hell not going to be enough.

She was gripping his shoulders, legs wrapped around his hips and meeting him thrust for thrust when she whispered, "More."

He deepened his thrusts, angling to brush her G-spot with each one. He switched to the breast he'd neglected, lightly biting her nipple. She didn't cry out when she came this time. Her heels dug into his back, and she seemed to stop breathing. Her cunt squeezed around his cock and drove him to the edge of his control.

He released her nipple, burying his face at the curve between her neck and shoulder. He barely resisted the urge to bite, to mark her soft, smooth skin. He kissed her instead, but she moaned into his mouth, her tongue meeting his, and it didn't help him regain command. He was going to embarrass himself, come much too soon. He wanted her to come again at least once, with him. Just once more.

He slipped an arm under one leg, pulling it over his shoulder, leaving her spread and exposed to his gaze. With his opposite hand, he rubbed her tight clit while watching his cock slide in and out of her. God, that was a sight designed to drive him out of his mind.

She wrapped her free leg around his waist, her hips rising to meet his thrust for thrust. Just when he thought he'd gained enough control to last the night, her cunt tightened, clamped down around him. She cried out as she came, and a dam burst inside him. Gloating, possessive pride. Not even trying to control himself anymore, he lifted her other leg over his shoulder and held her hips still as he pounded into her, gritting his teeth against the orgasm swelling in him.

There was no fighting it though. Another stroke. Two. Three. And he was coming, aware of the aftershocks shaking her body, the tiny convulsions in her cunt that helped milk him dry. Slowly he released her legs and collapsed over her, struggling to catch his breath.

"We have to do that again," he said between gasps.

She laughed. "No way. I'm worn out."

He rolled off her, propped up on one elbow to smile down at her. "We have to work on your stamina, baby."

Her grin disappeared and her eyes became wary. "One night, remember?"

"You can't be serious. This was incredible. You really don't want to do it again? Ever?"

She didn't answer for a long time. Fuck. She did mean it.

"The sun will be up in about three hours. Can't we just enjoy what's left of the night?" she whispered.

He searched her eyes, hoping to see anything other than determination to walk away from him in a few hours. It wasn't there. That just made him more resolved. He was willing to concede tonight's battle to her, but the war was far from over.

"Sure," he said.

Then he spent the next three hours doing his damndest to make her forget her objections. Hell, he wanted to give her so much pleasure she forgot her own name.

He fell asleep before the first rays of sunlight streamed into the room, and woke alone.

Chapter Three

The bell over the door jangled as Nancy entered Ink Spot, the tattoo shop in Panama City where she was employed. Michael, working right up front in the first chair, didn't miss a beat when he glanced up to see who was entering.

"You look like hell, darlin'."

"Gee, thanks," she answered, without any sarcasm.

She knew she looked like something the cat dragged in. Last weekend she'd had the best sex of her life and then spent the next seven days avoiding Brad Moore, who seemed to have forgotten the one-night stand part of the evening. She was having a hard time remembering why she'd insisted on that herself. She'd thought one night would get rid of the craving? Ha! It only made it worse. She was ready to crawl out of her skin.

So instead of enjoying her Saturday off, she'd come in to work looking for distraction. Anything to get Brad off her mind. She should have counted on Michael being around. As co-owner, he practically lived at the place while she was just a part-time artist.

"Seriously, babe," he continued over the buzz of the tattoo gun, "what's going on? I haven't seen you like this in two years." That last was said softly, as if he was reluctant to dredge up her unpleasant past.

And who could blame him? She'd met Michael eleven years ago, fresh out of college with a fine arts degree and fascinated by tattooing. He'd taken her on as an apprentice and she'd loved it. A few years later Jessalyn had taken over her mother's art galleries, one in Bank's Crossing

and one in Panama City. She'd agreed to help her manage the Panama City location and split her time between the two businesses. That was also about the same time she'd met Derek McCoy.

Derek had broody bad boy down pat. Michael and Jessalyn had hated him on sight. She should have paid attention to their instincts. Instead, she'd ended up in a whirlwind courtship and married before she discovered just how bad he was. He'd died two years ago. Well, that made it all sound so innocent, didn't it? Jessalyn shot him after he broke into her house while Nancy was still in the hospital recovering from his twisted obsession.

Nancy still struggled with that guilt sometimes. Jessalyn had been her friend for years, had helped her escape the monster she'd married. And how was Jessalyn repaid? By becoming the next target of Derek's fury. Jessalyn didn't blame Nancy, but she sure as hell blamed herself.

A few weeks after the shooting, Jessalyn sold the Panama City gallery where Nancy had been attacked. She passed the old building every time she came to work, but she'd never been back inside. The place creeped her out too bad. Shuddering, she shoved that memory aside. She didn't want to remember the pain and self-loathing and fear. She'd married him, after all. Everyone had seen what he was but her.

"Earth to Nancy."

"Sorry," she said, forcing a smile for Michael. "I'm fine. Just having a stretch of insomnia."

His gaze sharpened on her, and she hurried to reassure him.

"Nothing like that."

She knew he was remembering the nightmares she'd confessed to in a moment of weakness after Derek's death. Some good came of that actually. He'd insisted she go see a shrink, Philip Rossi, a client of theirs, who specialized in trauma. He'd helped more than she usually admitted. If she had any sense she'd call and make an appointment now. But any sense she'd had left the building last weekend. And it wasn't returning. Because as much as she knew she needed to stay far away from Brad Moore? Yeah, she wanted to jump his bones more.

Before Michael could respond to her denial, Holly, their

receptionist, came over. She grinned at Nancy. "Dark and mysterious called for you again."

That definitely got Michael's attention, and she hoped like hell her panic didn't show in her eyes. "What did you tell him?"

Holly shrugged. "That you're off today. But I can't imagine why you're avoiding someone who sounds so yummy. Unless he doesn't live up to his voice?"

Oh, he more than lived up to the dark promise of his voice. "He does."

Holly put her hands on her hips and frowned. "Then what are you doing here?"

"He's not my type."

She was going to Hell for lying, and Holly knew her well enough to know she wasn't being truthful. Her skepticism was in her tone, the incredulous look on her face. Sometimes it really sucked working with people who knew you so well.

"That right?"

She just shook her head. She wasn't going there, whether going there was engaging in this conversation or seeing Brad again. She'd learned her lesson, right? No more bad boys. Even if he had a voice that stroked her most intimate places and a tongue like sin. And his hands...best to forget them too.

Michael and Holly exchanged a long look, and Nancy idly wondered if they were sleeping together again. On second thought, probably not. They weren't arguing. The last time they'd tried and failed at a relationship, the shop had become so tense Nancy had dreaded coming to work. It'd taken months for things to get back to normal.

Michael gave a slight shake of his head, signaling he didn't believe a word she said but wasn't going to bring it up now, and returned to the tattoo he was working on.

"Since you're here, want to draw me something? Got a client coming in a couple hours."

"Sure." That was why she'd come in. To work. Not daydream over the unattainable. "What am I drawing?"

“A panther.”

Great. Something she could do in her sleep. Not much in the way of distraction there.

“We’ve got dozens in the binders.” The books of flash—or designs, to most people—that they kept for clients to browse through were bulging on a shelf up front. Michael didn’t look up as he answered.

“He wants it to look more tribal than realistic.”

They had a couple like that too. But whatever. It was the client’s money. She shrugged, pulled her bag over her shoulder, and went to make herself comfortable at a tall table in the back of the shop.

The tattoo gun buzzed as Michael worked, and the familiar sound comforted her, soothed her into ignoring everything but the paper and pencil she set on the table. She drew a sample of a stylized tribal panther, her mind wandering as she worked.

Inevitably, her thoughts turned to Saturday night and Brad. She could avoid seeing him, but she couldn’t block him from her thoughts. He’d been demanding, completely in control while he wrested away all of hers. It should have scared her, but she’d felt safe in his arms. It wasn’t until later, when he slept, that the fear set in.

That fear was unreasonable, primal, but it was real and she hadn’t fought it. She’d freed herself from his embrace, careful not to wake him, and dressed. She’d taken one last look before sneaking out. It was dawn, and enough light came through the windows for a good look.

He’d been lying on his left side, and she could see the scars on his lower rib cage that disappeared but she knew curved around to his back. They were extensive, and she wondered how he got them. How did he feel about them? As curious as she was, she was pretty sure it was an off-limits subject. He’d frozen for a few seconds when her hands had slid over them. If he was the tattooing type, she’d expect him to get them covered once they healed enough. She did a lot of work to cover scars.

What would she design for him if given the chance? She set the panther sketches aside after glancing through them. The cat’s stealth didn’t suit Brad. He was too direct. He would strike from the front in clear sight, would be intent on winning his objective. He’d only resort to

cunning if all else failed.

She flipped open her sketchbook. Her pencil touched paper without conscious thought, strokes sure and brisk. The outline of a dragon began to appear on paper as quickly as it appeared in her mind, and her fingers hurried to keep up. To capture the design before any of the details faded away.

She lost herself in the art, entering an almost trancelike state when she really got in the groove. Everything faded away. The past. The present. No Derek, no Brad, and no worries. She was jarred out of the peaceful state by the shrill ring of the phone. Someone answered it up front, probably Holly, and it took her a few minutes to calm her racing heart, one palm pressed to her chest as she got her breathing back to normal. After two years she'd begun to accept she might always be jumpy.

She heard Holly make an appointment up front and became aware of the quiet in the shop. Flipping the sketchbook closed, she stood and stretched, noticed it was dark outside the big plate-glass window in front.

Michael was cleaning up his station, his client having left while she worked. She'd totally lost track of time. She repacked her satchel and carried some of the panther drawings to him. There were a couple she wanted to change a bit.

"Thanks," he said when she handed them to him. "He had to reschedule, so one of us can do this next weekend."

She shrugged. "Sure. Are you done for the night?"

A glance at the wall confirmed it was getting late, nine p.m., but if there were still people coming in Michael would keep the shop open. At the moment it was empty. He glanced at Holly before answering her. A look that was full of, *I want some private time with a certain woman.*

Uh oh. Not again.

"I'll probably stick around a little while."

"Michael," she warned, lowering her voice so she wouldn't be overheard. "Leave Holly alone. You already screwed that up once."

"I have no idea what you're talking about. We aren't back together." It was the innocent look on his face that gave him away.

"Yeah right."

"Right. I promise. There won't be a repeat. You should go home and get some sleep," he ordered.

She rolled her eyes. Sometimes he was such a mother hen.

"I'm going. I'm going."

And hopefully she would sleep without dreams of the man she'd denied herself.

Chapter Four

She picked up a chef salad on the way home, but only picked at it as she stood at her kitchen island. Even with the ancient air conditioner running it was too damned hot to eat. She put the lid back on and placed it in the fridge before moving to stand in front of the sliding glass doors. She'd bought this house partly because it was so close to the beach and it was small enough to keep up on her own, but the main reason was the pool enclosed in a privacy fence in the backyard.

She slid the door open, toeing her shoes off before she stepped outside, leaving the door cracked open so she could hear the phone ring. She groaned when she realized what she was doing. She'd ignored him all week and he hadn't called the last two nights. That was what she wanted, right? Except, fuck, if he called tonight she'd answer. She just wanted to hear his voice. No big deal. Right. She wasn't even fooling herself anymore.

She pulled her tank top off and dropped it to the ground, unsnapped her bra and dropped it too. The moon was high and the lights in the pool were on. They were glowing. Enticing. She unsnapped her jeans, pushed them and her underwear down and didn't hesitate as she dove in. She stayed on the bottom several seconds before springing up to take a breath of air.

She floated on her back. It felt great, the water warm from the Gulf sun, but it didn't do anything to take the edge off. She was wound so tight, horny as hell with no relief in sight. What was Brad doing? Was he

thinking of her as much as she thought of him? Was he also feeling this crazy need? She groaned. This wasn't helping.

She moved her hands to cup her breasts. Imagined they were his. His rough hands gently kneading. His tongue, not the water, lapping over her sensitive nipples. His fingers squeezing just enough for an exhilarating pinch of pain, then soothing the ache of the hard points with his mouth. Keeping one hand on her breast, she slid the other down her ribs, over her belly, spread her legs to find her clit. She sucked in her breath when her finger brushed over it, sensation shooting through her.

This was what she needed. She pressed harder, wishing it was his fingers, his mouth, bringing her to this intense state of arousal.

A sudden gust of wind blew the side gate open. She jerked upright, stood in the shallow end of the pool, instinct making her cross her arms over her chest even before she saw the shadowed figure standing in front of it.

* * * * *

Brad reached behind him and tugged on the gate's handle. It latched shut with a loud snick. He should have done that when he'd walked in. Big mistake on his part. Hell, he should have turned around and walked right back out. He'd come over to insist she talk to him, to insist she quit hiding from him. She'd disappeared after that one incredible night, and he had to make sure she was okay. At the very least. But she hadn't answered the front door when he rang, so he'd come around back since her car was there. He'd figured maybe she was in the pool. And, fuck yeah, was she.

The last thing he'd expected was to find her skinny dipping, though. Touching herself. Pleasuring herself. He'd frozen in place. Captivated. Fascinated. He wanted to watch as she made herself come. Then he wanted a turn. And damn it, then the wind blew and warned her of his presence.

He should feel like a creep watching her without her knowledge or consent. He knew her past, knew his presence had to scare her. But he

couldn't resist, didn't feel guilty for what could be interpreted as stalker-like behavior when he met her gaze and saw no fear. Just desire and need and heat.

"Don't stop on my account, baby." He stepped onto the concrete patio surrounding the pool, stopped at the side of the pool. Would she panic if he stripped down and joined her? One step at a time.

He knelt and trailed his hand through the water, smiled as her eyes widened with interest. She swam out to the middle of the pool as if undecided about what came next.

"Do it again, baby. You look so beautiful—all wet and hot—touching yourself."

She flushed scarlet, her breath rushing out then back into her lungs, lifting her breasts above the water briefly. She didn't move, though, a bit of uncertainty inching into her expression. Why? She couldn't have missed how turned on he was. Even kneeling, the arousal couldn't be mistaken in the bulge in his shorts.

He moved one hand to his cock, stroked it up and down. The rasp of fabric, of his zipper, only made him harder.

"Look at what you do to me. Don't quit on me now, Nancy."

Reluctantly, slowly, seductively, she lowered her arms, exposing herself to his gaze. His cock throbbed. It hurt so good. It would feel even better when he got inside her. And then he was no longer thinking, no longer planning what he wanted to do to her because she touched herself. Floating on her back, she cupped her breasts, rolled her nipples between her fingers. Fuck. She was killing him here. Had he really thought this was a good idea? Still, he wanted her to go on. Wanted to see her hand between her thighs, spreading the lips of her pussy, and stroking her clit till she came. If she didn't do it soon, he would lose his ever lovin' mind.

"I don't think I can do this with you watching," she whispered.

"Let me help," he volunteered. The uncertainty was still in her eyes. No. Not uncertainty. It was more like reluctance. He repressed a spurt of triumph. She might not like it, but she wanted him. Maybe as much as he wanted her.

"What were you thinking about before I came in?" *Who were you*

thinking about?

"You." Another barely heard whisper, the blush a furious red now. She was embarrassed?

"Good. You're the only thing on my mind when I touch myself." And there had been nothing but solo action for a week. It was driving him crazy. He stroked his pounding cock through his shorts, watched her eyes widen. "But it's not enough, baby. And nowhere near as sexy as watching you."

"I could say the same."

She closed her eyes and smiled as her hands shifted to plump her nipples. Ah, fuck it. Who was he trying to fool? He was getting in that pool and giving them both what they so clearly wanted. He stripped, leaving a condom within easy reach, and dove in.

He came up next to her and replaced one of her hands with his mouth. She moaned and arched up to meet him, laughing when he caught her head before she dunked herself.

"That was close. Thanks."

"Hmm, my pleasure," he said between licks. She let him continue for a couple of minutes before moving away.

"What the hell are we doing, Brad?"

She backed away into the shallow end and sat on one of the concrete steps in the water. "You know I don't want to start something. Yet, here you are."

He moved slowly, letting her see him coming. "We already started something. I just want you to give us the chance to explore it."

"You scare me."

He nodded. "Sometimes. I know. But, baby, you sure as hell weren't scared with my cock inside you last weekend."

She blushed again. "Well, that was blunt."

He shrugged. "I'm a blunt kinda guy."

She looked away. "It's just sex."

That pissed him off and he forgot caution, forgot he was trying to coax her into giving him a shot. He was close enough to touch her now, but he didn't. He set his hands on the step on either side of her hips and

leaned forward. "Is that right?"

She looked into his eyes, bottom lip between her teeth, and nodded.

"Well, since we've established you aren't afraid of me when we're fucking, I don't see what the problem is."

She glared at him. Good. He preferred anger over fear and reluctance any day. "And crass. Add it to blunt."

He grinned. "Are you keeping a list?"

"Maybe," she groused. God, she was beautiful. He couldn't look away, and she seemed just as reluctant to break the gaze.

"I have to kiss you," he whispered.

"I know," she answered just as softly.

He lifted one hand, traced the outline of her lips with his fingertip. "I have to do a lot more than that."

"Yeah. You do."

"This is not just sex," he said firmly, not allowing her to answer before he kissed her. He couldn't take hearing another denial.

He pulled her with him into deeper water. When it was deep enough to reach his chest, he picked her up and she wrapped her legs around him. He groaned. His cock pulsed at her entrance, but he wasn't fucking her yet. He was going to make this last. His hands were on her ass, so he pushed her higher up his body. She wasn't rubbing over his erection anymore. He wasn't sure which was worse.

Since he'd have to wait to put his cock in her, he did the next best thing. His fingers skimmed over her, up and down her back, before returning to her ass, moving on to her pussy. She leaned back, putting enough space between them to give him full access. Man, she was beautiful. Wet and slick. She smelled like woman and chlorine. Who knew that was so hot? Her eyes were cloudy with lust, her expression that dazed look that drove him crazy. Her lips were red and wet, slightly swollen from his kisses. He could get used to seeing her like that.

She moaned when he thrust a finger inside her. Moved with him when he stroked her clit. Then amazingly, spectacularly, came apart in his arms. Oh yeah. He could definitely get used to this. And he couldn't wait anymore. He carried her out of the pool, carefully set her on her feet

before lying back on a lounge chair.

Nancy couldn't believe she was doing this—having sex on her back patio—and liking, no, *loving* it so much. The things the man could do to her body, could coax from her body with very little effort, were sinful. Hopefully, she could return the favor. Soon. But not now. He was easy to read, waiting impatiently for her to take him inside her.

“Ride me.”

She grabbed the condom he'd left on the side of the pool and had to rip it open with her teeth because her hands were shaking so much. But then he was covered and she was straddling him, pushing down slowly. Taking him inside her slowly. Giving her body time to adjust to him, hoping to settle her mind in the process. She gasped as she took more of him. Like that was going to happen? He twisted her inside out.

She moved, finding a slow but steady rhythm that felt so good. Right away, she knew he liked the position, had put her there with a purpose in mind. His hands were on her breasts, kneading at first, but then playing with her rings. Tugging just enough for a lick of pain. Lust spread like fire through her veins. She moved faster, taking him harder.

“Mmm,” he murmured, pulling her down to take one of her nipples between his teeth for a quick bite. “You like that touch of pain, baby?”

When she didn't respond he did it again, this time to the other nipple. Again there was a little spike of pain, not enough to be really painful, but more than enough to make her pussy spasm and get impossibly wetter. He was killing her here. She wished he hadn't figured out how much she liked it. He'd use that knowledge mercilessly. But God, at the moment, with him sucking her hard into his mouth, she couldn't work up any anger.

She gave a disappointed sigh when he released her and put his hands on her hips. Urging her to go faster, harder, meeting her thrust for thrust. She couldn't look away from him. His face was tight, cheekbones a stark relief, lips pressed together. He was holding back, waiting for her to come before he let himself do the same. It was a new experience for her.

He was right. This was so much more than sex. She'd missed this,

him filling her. Had craved it. But she'd also missed just seeing him. The silent, still man who managed to make her feel everything she'd been missing. God, she was in so much trouble.

But that was a worry for another time. As if the realization triggered some kind of switch, she no longer had any control over her body. It was the most intense orgasm she'd ever had. She shook with the force of it. Unable to command her body anymore, she was vaguely aware of Brad taking over, holding her hips as he drove into her. He came quickly, with a cry muffled in her neck.

Chapter Five

The nightmare woke him up. He jerked upright, his heart hammering in his chest, the bitterness of old familiar helplessness in his mouth. It faded when he realized he was in Nancy's house, in her bed. For the first time the nightmare didn't chase him back into the world. All he had to do was see her, and the lingering images were gone.

She was watching from an armchair in the corner of the room. A task light lit her, making her hair shine more silver than blonde. Her legs were curled up, feet tucked to one side, and a sketchbook rested on her lap.

He wanted her to come back to bed to make sure the shadows didn't return, but her expression was wary, so cautious he bit back the demand. After a minute her muscles relaxed, her eyes became less guarded.

"Nightmare?"

He nodded, not yet trusting his voice to answer.

"How long?" He must have missed something. What the hell did she mean by that? His confusion must have shown.

"How long have you had them? I used to have horrible nightmares." A tremor shook her slight frame. "After..." She didn't finish the sentence, but she didn't have to. He could guess what she was referring to. After her ex tried to kill her and Jessalyn.

"A year." He surprised himself by answering, but figured what the hell. Anything to get that look off her face. She didn't respond for a long

moment, and just when he thought she wouldn't, she surprised him again. She pointed the end of her pencil towards his side. "Is that when that happened?"

His instinct was to shut down, withdraw into himself. It was what he would have done a week ago and still would if anyone else dared to ask. He resisted the impulse, because this time was different. For one, she was actually getting personal, and if he wanted this thing between them to go anywhere he owed her some of his secrets. He would have to give her much more than that, but he'd worry about it later. But also, this time the dream had been different. Instead of trying to save his men, he'd been trying to save her.

The Army had given him some basic psych training. He knew this new dream was a warning. Keep letting her in, let these feelings continue to grow, and if anything ever happened to her, it would destroy him. This time he should be the one running and hiding, but he'd never been the type to do that. She was the only person in the world he'd take that risk for. No. He didn't want to back away.

He wanted a right to her, and she wouldn't give him that choice if he shut down to avoid painful memories. When had he realized that? During the dream? How could he be so sure he was right? He didn't know how, but he was certain it was true.

"A year ago," he repeated. "There was an ambush. I couldn't get to some of my men quick enough to save them." His voice broke at the end. Oh hell no. She had to know he was strong enough to carry his burdens and hers. Needed to know he could protect her, take care of her.

Her face softened, her voice filled with sympathy. "I'm sorry. I can see that was hard for you."

He nodded confirmation once, still unable to trust his voice. Now that he'd spoken, the compulsion to touch her, to seek solace in her body, was impossible to resist. He stood up and watched her body language and eyes as he approached, searching for any signs of fear or retreat. He stopped at her side and looked to see what she was drawing. Traced his finger around the outside of the dragon.

"Very cool."

"Thanks," she whispered.

It couldn't be for her. It was too masculine, had too much raw power and dominance in the wingspan. It had to be for a man. Incredibly, he felt the sharp sting of jealousy coil through him.

His voice was gruff, edgy when he asked, "Who's it for?"

For a second he sensed her fear, but she quickly squashed it. She snapped the book shut and set it on the table beside her. *That's my girl.*

"Someone I suspect will never get inked," she answered softly. Her gaze was direct. Telling.

He picked up the book and flipped through it, stopping at the drawing of the dragon. There was so much confidence, so much power in the image. Was that really how she saw him? Not the bogeyman she spent so much time hiding from, but a man of honor? He hoped so. Hope was a new and alien thing in his life. He didn't want to lose it, but he asked anyway.

"For me?"

She struggled for an answer, trying to look casual, but he saw the uncertainty chase across her face. She took the book from his hands, ripped the page out, and handed it to him. "It's yours if you want it."

What he wanted was her. Wanted her to be as permanent a part of his life as any image he had put on his skin. "Do you come with it?"

She sucked in a harsh breath, shook her head slightly. "I don't think so."

"Still running scared."

"I already told you I'm not looking for anything long term. And you're too—"

She broke off the thought, but he had a good idea what she was thinking. Too much like her ex. Too dominant, too demanding, too controlling. Too hard. It pissed him off and he let her see it. Damn it, he was nothing like Derek McCoy. He lifted his hand to touch the side of her face—he couldn't resist her—but dropped it when she flinched.

How could he get it through her thick skull that he would never hurt her? He wasn't a threat to her. He wanted to protect her. Fuck it. Words were never gonna convince her.

He set the drawing and sketchbook back on the table. Then he knelt in front of her. Carefully he wrapped his hand around her ankles, tugged them free and spread her thighs so he could move between them. He rested his forearms on the chair, not trusting himself to pull her into his embrace. Not yet. This had to be slow. Careful. Gentle. Even if it killed him.

He took his time lowering his head, gave her time to see him coming and stop him. One little word and he would stop. The rejection would sting like hell. But she didn't say no. She sat perfectly still, holding her breath, holding his gaze.

Her eyelids fluttered closed just before he brushed her lips. Once. Twice. Soft, light kisses. Until she sighed, wrapped one hand around his nape and pulled him closer, opening her mouth to his. It was all the invitation he needed. He thrust his tongue into her mouth. He would never get enough of her taste. But he broke the kiss before it went too far. There were other things to taste.

She was flushed when he sat back on his heels. She'd put on an old ratty T-shirt when she'd gotten out of bed. He had it off in less than a second; then his hands were on her knees, spreading her wide open for his perusal.

"Brad?"

He loved the little breathy gasp in her voice. Like it or not, she was turned on. He put his hands under her knees and tugged until her bottom rested almost on the edge of the chair.

"Hmm?"

He kissed the inside of her leg above her knee, moving up to the more sensitive area around her thighs. Using his fingers, he spread her. Her pussy was pink and glistening, her clit clear to his gaze. He touched her first with his thumb, then his tongue. She squirmed, and he held her still until he realized she was trying to get closer. He draped her legs over his shoulders. While sucking on her clit, he thrust a finger into her, rotating it to rub against her G-spot. He knew that made her crazy.

Her hips moved to meet the movement of his finger, which he joined with another. He was rewarded with her moan of pleasure,

would've smiled if he weren't otherwise occupied. Too soon she was trembling, gasping as she reached for orgasm. Too soon. He'd wanted to drag this out. Go slow. But she tasted so sweet and feminine, and *he'd* brought her body to this point. He wanted to feel her convulse around his cock and when she started to come, when she cried out his name, he stood and pulled her up with him, turning to the closest wall. He lifted her with her back against it, her legs wrapped his waist, and thrust inside her.

They both froze. Shit. He was trying to prove he wasn't a domineering caveman. But, God help him, he couldn't move. Didn't want to stop. Especially when the stunned look in her eyes faded and the heat came back. He kissed her. Slowly at first, then building up speed, strength. Pouring all his desire into it. When she was clinging to him, grinding her pelvis against his, he started to move. Short, shallow strokes. Not as satisfying, but the only way to keep a little bit of control, to draw this out. She was having none of it, though. Her long nails bit into his shoulder and she broke the kiss.

"Move, damn it."

Did she even realize she was ordering him around now? He almost laughed. He did smile.

"Yes, ma'am."

He gave her what she wanted. Deeper. Harder. Faster. And like he'd known it would be, it was too much too fast and he was coming like a horny teenager with zero self-control. Thankfully, she was too.

Chapter Six

Nancy gave Michael her evilest glare as she set up. He didn't even notice. He was too busy chatting up Philip Rossi, the mystery guy with the tribal panther request. And of course Michael had another appointment coming in so Nancy was doing this one. She'd been well and truly set up. Talk about interfering bosses. At this rate it would be no time at all before he tracked down Brad to interrogate him about his intentions.

She almost snorted. That was just what she needed. When she had everything ready, tattoo gun covered with plastic, ink poured into caps and ready, she motioned Philip over. Since the tattoo was going to start on his upper arm and curve up over his shoulder, he pulled his shirt off and set it on a chair out of the way. Neither spoke as she cleaned and shaved the area. She changed gloves when she was done and applied the stencil, letting him check its placement in a mirror before getting to work.

She applied a thin layer of antibiotic cream with a tongue depressor and then started the outline on the bottom right side of the tattoo. An unusual silence stretched. Typically, she chatted while she worked. It helped calm nervous clients. Philip didn't need distraction, however, so she let the quiet stretch.

"So am I getting the silent treatment for a reason?" he asked when she paused to dip the needle for more ink.

"Nope." Oh crap. "What should we talk about?"

"How 'bout your new boyfriend?"

She kept the needle steady, but she really wanted to walk over and

stab Michael in the eye with it.

"First, he's not my boyfriend. Second, he's off limits as a topic for discussion."

"Ah, your commitment phobia rears its ugly head."

Damn it, he wasn't gonna give up.

"It's not that."

"What is it then?"

Another pause for ink. What the hell? Maybe it was time for a little brutal honesty. She'd trusted Philip before with her issues. Now didn't have to be any different.

"He's a soldier. Well, ex-soldier. He's...a man's man, know what I mean?"

"He scares you."

"Sometimes. It's stupid. I know he's not a danger to me. He wouldn't ever hurt me. Rationally, I know that." She shrugged. There was no way to really know that yet, but she was finally listening to her instincts, and she was positive she was right about this. "He's a protector. But I have a hard time telling that apart from obsession, you know."

"I do know. But does he?"

"Hell no. I'm trying to keep some distance here."

"You could do it that way," he said. "You could wrap yourself up in cotton. Let that old fear rule you and refuse to ever take any risks. Be alone. And miserable."

She laughed. "I'm not miserable."

"You aren't happy either. Talk to him. You've come too far to let fear rule your life."

"He makes a good point."

It was the voice from her dreams. Unmistakable. Since she was using a station in the back of the shop and was turned away from the door, she'd had no warning. Thank God, she was taking a break to refill ink caps. If she'd heard him behind her without warning, she would have made a major screw-up on Philip's arm.

She couldn't believe he was there. Why? He walked around in front of her before she could ask, looked at the panther coming to shape on

Philip's arm. "Nice work."

She sat stunned as they introduced themselves and even shook hands. He was calm. Friendly, even. The intensity Brad focused on her was nowhere in evidence.

Philip's smile and voice were sharp, almost accusing. "You will take care of her," he ordered Brad.

"Of course."

They acted like she wasn't even sitting there. "Y'all seemed to have skipped some steps. And I can take care of myself."

"Some burdens are better shared," her oh-so-enigmatic shrink said.

She snorted. No way. She'd worked too hard to become self-sufficient to let someone take over her life.

"What if I need you to take care of me?" Brad asked softly, challenge shining in his eyes. Not just challenge. There was a hint of vulnerability there too.

Take care of him? He needed *her*? The idea was too damned tempting. She almost jumped up to volunteer and couldn't ignore the part of her that whispered, *yes, let me*. Like she could fix him? Save him? That she considered it for even half a second made her so angry with herself. People changed if they wanted to, but you couldn't make them change. She couldn't save him. She'd saved herself and he'd have to do the same. Maybe then...

But no. She wouldn't set herself up for that kind of heartbreak, considering, hoping, for the impossible. Bottom lip between her teeth, she kept the thought where it belonged—in her head. Everyone was quiet when she went back to work.

Fascinated, Brad watched her work. Her hands were small, but deft and skilled. The decision he'd been hesitating over was easy to make after witnessing her dedication to her art. He waited for another pause before speaking.

"When can you do my dragon?"

"Where do you want it?" she asked softly, as she went back to work, and he realized she knew exactly where he wanted it. She didn't expect his answer to startle or surprise her while she had the needle

pressed to someone's skin. More than that, he suddenly knew she'd designed it for the exact placement he had in mind. The woman was perceptive.

"Over the scars."

This time she stopped. Tilting her head a little to the side, she looked over his body. Blood immediately rushed to his cock. How the hell did she do that with just a look? *Down, boy*. It wasn't even a sexual examination. Her gaze was unfocused as she thought, and he thought he knew her well enough to know the scars didn't disturb her. She was considering something else.

"Let's give it a few more weeks to heal. The longer the better."

Let's, she'd said. As if it was a mutual decision for them to make, not simply the advice of an artist to her client. Did she realize that her words implied she was going to give them a chance? Had she consciously made that decision? He didn't dare ask. He wasn't giving her any room to back away from something he knew was wonderful and irreplaceable.

Looking for a distraction, anything to keep him from grabbing her and kissing the hell out of her, he checked his watch. He had a group therapy meeting at the VA and didn't want to be late. He stood, and her gaze followed his rise.

"Where are you off to?" she asked, then bit her lip again, scowling. "Sorry. None of my business."

He laughed. She hadn't figured it out yet. "Actually, it is, baby. What I do, where I go, is definitely your business."

She didn't respond and refused to meet his eyes, so he continued.

"The VA calls it group therapy, but it's really a bunch of old soldiers sitting around comparing war stories."

He'd been reluctant to go at first. Shane had talked him into it. But after he met Nancy, it was easier. He wanted to be whole for her.

"Does it help?"

The surprise was easy to hear in her voice. Therapy, group or otherwise, didn't mesh with her image of a hardened soldier, he guessed. That was partly his fault. He hadn't spoken much of the Army, though the old bitterness at the loss of his career was gone. She'd done that for him.

He'd been afraid he'd never fit in the civilian world, but he fit with her.

"Yeah. It does," he answered, a little surprised himself. Those men had become his friends. He knew he could call on any of them, at any time, if he needed a sympathetic ear or a kick in the ass. They could expect the same from him.

Again, his words surprised her. The corner of her mouth lifted in a sexy half grin that kicked him right in the gut. God, he was screwed. He couldn't live without this woman. How had that happened so fast?

"See you later then."

Was that a hint to make plans? He'd take it even if it wasn't.

"Dinner. Tonight, Nancy." He couldn't keep the little edge of warning from his voice. She wasn't avoiding him anymore. If she was surprised or put off by the demand, she didn't show it. She did shake her head no.

"I'll be here at least until nine."

"After that then." He had to see her later. There was just no way around it. He'd already adjusted to her later work hours. Nine or later was no big deal.

She huffed. "You're gonna insist, aren't you?"

It wasn't really a question, so he didn't respond.

"I'll call you when I get home."

He could insist she come straight to his house, but, well, she had a pool. He had very good memories of that pool. Memories he'd like to repeat. He shook his head. "I'll be there waiting for you."

She cocked an eyebrow and he knew what she was wondering. The fake rocks were a dime a dozen. Anyone who'd ever been in a hardware store would know what it was. He scowled. They were going to have to have a serious security discussion later.

"Yes, I know where the hide-a-key is. You've got to hide it better, baby. It doesn't help much to leave it right out on the front porch."

She narrowed her eyes. "Next time I will." And she'd be more security conscious without his insistence. It was too soon for that. He'd just scare her.

Even with those worries, his smile was wide and real. She'd given

herself away with her statement. "You aren't worried about me knowing where it is because you aren't afraid of me."

She glared. "You're pushing your luck, Moore."

He laughed again. Hell yeah. And hopefully his luck would hold.

Chapter Seven

After the meeting, he'd grabbed some coffee with some of the guys. The married ones. He needed to know how to make that work when half of the equation was pretty fucked up. He could function, sure. But he knew the nightmares would probably never completely go away. The urge to look over his shoulder and guard his six would never diminish. And Nancy would probably not appreciate those bursts of paranoia, especially when they grew to include her. He left the coffee shop reassured. Some of the guys had been married for years. They made it work.

It took him hours to realize the tight, uncomfortable feeling in his chest was happiness mixed with a healthy dose of good old-fashioned terror. He was standing in the meat aisle of Winn Dixie when it happened.

One minute he was picking out rib eye and the next he was visualizing engagement rings. Even though it was going to take a hell of a lot to convince her to marry him, he wondered how she'd want to do it. In the summer? Winter? In a church or on the beach? One thing was certain. It wasn't going to be a three-ring circus. He scowled. Unless that was really what she wanted. He couldn't deny her anything.

It was just after six when he looked up and saw his baby brother, Shane, and his new wife Jessalyn. Shit. He'd been so distracted with Nancy, he'd forgotten they'd returned. He should have been by the house to welcome them back and congratulate his brother again on catching such an incredible woman.

"Hey," he said, greeting them both. It only took half a second to figure out Jessalyn was good and pissed at him. He held his hands up in mock surrender and joked.

"Hey, I didn't do it. I swear."

"Really?" she asked sweetly. Way too sweetly. He gave his brother a questioning look, but Shane just shrugged. "So that wasn't you coming out of Nancy's house at the crack of dawn this morning?"

Uh oh. And o-kay. When did Jessalyn become Momma Bear?

"Nancy can take care of herself." Why did he say that? It would just give Nancy ammunition to use against him.

"If you break her heart..." He was glad she let the thought trail off. She was the one who'd fired the fatal shot at Nancy's ex, after all.

"I won't," he said softly.

"She's been through enough," she went on.

"I know that, Jessie," he said, using Shane's nickname for her. He carefully avoided his brother's gaze as he continued. "I can't live without her. You have my word, I won't hurt her."

She still looked suspicious. "You're pretty straight laced for her."

He grinned, that feeling in his chest expanding so much he thought he'd burst. "Maybe I need her to shake me up."

Her expression softened a bit. "Just remember who you have to answer to."

Behind her Shane rolled his eyes, but he was grinning like a fool. Brad absolutely knew better than to correct her. Nancy was his now. She didn't need Jessalyn to protect her. No way in hell was he going down that road, however. "Yes, ma'am."

Shane used the opportunity to change the subject, and after they made plans to go fishing in a few days, he dragged Jessalyn, who still looked pissed as hell, away. Brad hurried to pick up what he wanted—a

couple of steaks, sweet potatoes, and corn on the cob for the grill—and got out before she changed her mind and came back to lecture him some more.

Nancy called him a little after nine to tell him she'd left the shop, and when the time was right, he fired up the grill. If he timed it right, she'd get home just in time. But an hour and a half later, that feeling in his chest had morphed from mostly joy to full-blown alarm. The drive should have taken an hour tops. Where the hell was she?

He'd checked his phone a million times. No messages. No answer when he tried to call her. He was almost desperate enough to call Shane and send out the cavalry when a car pulled into the drive. He went out to meet her.

The sight that met him didn't improve his nerves.

* * * * *

Nancy waved her thanks when she got out of the patrol car.

"What the hell happened?" Brad demanded as they entered the circle of light pooling in front of the open door. It was easy to see he'd reverted back to the cold, contained man of just two weeks ago, and it hurt a bit as she edged past him into the house.

He shut the door behind him. Carefully. Way too carefully.

"Car accident," she said before he could ask again. "I'm fine. My car, unfortunately, is dead."

She saw immediately it was a poor choice of words. She'd tried to joke, tried to make light of it. He sure as hell didn't take it that way. "I'm fine."

"You're bleeding," he said, but he didn't approach. He'd gone pale under his tan arms crossed stiffly over his chest. She lifted her hand to her forehead.

"It's just a scratch. The paramedics looked at it."

"You should have called."

God, she'd wanted to. Wanted to hear the comforting reassurance of his voice. And because she'd wanted it so badly, she'd denied herself.

"It didn't occur to me. Sorry."

She winced. Partly at the callousness in her response, but more because he let his reserved mask fall. His stance didn't change, but the fury was easy to read in his eyes and clenched jaw. "It's just occurred to me that I can protect you from a lot of things. But I'd forgotten how dangerous, how deadly, as you say, everyday life can be."

The way he said it, cold and hard, made her believe he'd decided she wasn't worth the risk. Damn. She'd actually been looking forward to getting home. Had had the crazy idea he'd hold her while she recovered from the shock. But he was wrapping himself up in that cold shell he'd been weeks ago. Maybe he was even reconsidering a relationship with her. Just when she'd begun to realize that was exactly the last thing she wanted.

Something in her started to shrivel up and die. Hope, she realized. Or maybe she was wrong, she speculated as he started pacing her small living room like a restless animal. A month ago he wouldn't have let her see him this angry, would he? A month ago she would never have believed she was on the verge of a new relationship.

Her head started to pound. Delayed reaction or aggravated by the current situation? Who the hell knew? She didn't care. She just wanted to be held, reassured. She wanted him to kiss her and tell her everything would be okay. It wasn't like her, but she finally got what Philip had been saying about sharing burdens. She didn't know how to get through to him, though. He was using anger as a shield, and that made her both sad and angry in return.

"You know what I finally realize? Life isn't pretty. Well, I've known that a long time. But sometimes you go through the worst shit and you survive it and you think, well, it can't get any worse. It's got to be all roses from here. But it doesn't always work that way. It isn't always sunshine and smiles."

He stood frozen, not saying a word. She got that underneath all that fury he was scared, but she was determined. She plowed on.

"I'd rather have a year, a week. Hell, even an hour. With you. Just knowing I have one more hour makes it worth it. But not if you're gonna

go back to being cold and controlled and so reserved I don't have a clue what's going on in your head. If that's what's going on here," she paused to shrug, "then go ahead and leave. But this time, it isn't me running away, Brad."

"We're quite a pair, aren't we?" he finally spoke.

"Yeah," she said, but all she was thinking was, *thank God. He's not leaving*. She pushed a bit. "I think we are."

He was quiet a long time, just staring at her. "Can I tell you I love you without you freaking out? And, oh yeah, you scared the hell out of me?"

Joy bloomed in her. Pure, unadulterated joy. She pretended to think about it. "I think so."

He stepped closer. "And that I can't live without you?" Another step closer. "If you ever do anything like this again and don't call me, I'll turn you over my knee."

She fought a smile. He'd never hurt her. "Maybe."

"And—" He took a deep breath. "I want you to marry me."

Okay. He surprised her with that one. She hadn't seen it coming, but the idea didn't terrify her. She'd think about it later. He was close enough to touch her now, to lean close and touch her mouth with his.

She sighed. Yes. She'd think about it later. Much, much later.

Author Bio

Loribelle is like the South she calls home. Hot and sultry. Languid and sexy. Magnolias and gardenias scent her silk-lined boudoir, and men and children alike bow to her magnificence...

Okay, maybe it isn't quite that glamorous. She does have two smart and lovely daughters who give her a run for her money and a son who will one day be someone's model of a romance hero. (She promises.) Her husband is a real-life hero, and Loribelle just tries to keep up with the demands of military life. In between, she writes a book or two.

She's had every job under the sun, but haven't most writers? That Army military police, bookstore manager, waitress, wedding photographer, website designer experience has to come in useful sometimes. As they say in the South, it all washes out in the end.

She loves hearing from her readers and can be found at <http://www.loribellehunt.com>.