

PRESENTING

BOOKS WE LOVE
SPICY MINI READS

Compiled by Jude Mason



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A Selection of Excerpts
From the Author Members of
Books We Love SPICE

2009 Edition

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 Author Barbara Baldwin's Website: <http://www.authorsden.com/barbarajbaldwin>
 Publisher's Website: <http://www.whiskeycreekpress.com/torrid/>

FANTASIES DELIVERED by Barbara Baldwin



ANYWHERE, ANYTIME, ANYWAY, a series – Stories about men of passion who will make their ladies' fantasies come true.

Behind the ordinary façade of the workaday world, Gage, Chase, Travis and John McVicker have more to their backgrounds than meet the eye because their best quality -- passionate sex -- is one skill you won't find on their resumes.

Each brother has a separate book so I've started with the first – Gage's story in "Fantasies Delivered" – as an excerpt here. Gage McVicker is a disillusioned millionaire who takes a break from his computer company to travel the country doing odd jobs. While working in the mailroom of a New York publisher, he delivers mail to Keva Monroe, senior editor of erotic romance, and it doesn't take long to discover she's as hot in bed as the books she edits. In this excerpt, Gage is Keva's date at a ball that her publishing company is sponsoring, at which the participants are in authentic period costume.

"Tell me, Miss Monroe, just how authentic is your costume?" Gage questioned her as they twirled to the music.

"Whatever do you mean, Mr. McVicker?" She was having too much fun not to continue the role-playing he seemed to enjoy.

He leaned closer to whisper just above her ear. "Do your pantalets have a slit in the crotch?"

She missed a step and his arm tightened around her waist.

"How did you—"

Gage smiled at her, his eyes glittering mischievously. "A man bent on seduction always does his homework." He pulled her tight and whirled her around just as the music ended.

“You looked flushed, Miss Monroe.” He spoke loud enough for some of the nearby guests to overhear. “Perhaps a walk in the gardens while we wait for the supper line to lessen is just what you need.” Without waiting for her to reply, he pulled her hand through the crook in his elbow and led her off the dance floor and out through the double doors to the gardens.

The minute they got beyond the lights of the ballroom, Gage turned and pulled her into his arms, ravishing her mouth as his hands caressed her body. Keva responded with a hot hunger that matched his, her arms sliding under his coat to bring him tight against her.

“Too many clothes,” Gage murmured as his lips traveled the curve of her bodice, kissing the tops of her breasts. He slid the sleeve of her dress off her shoulder, loosening the bodice enough for him to reach in and cup her breast.

“Oh,” was all Keva could manage as he sucked her into his mouth. She felt herself grow damp and didn’t think she could stand it if Gage didn’t touch her all over.

“Damn,” Gage whispered as voices from the doorway interrupted their rendezvous. He quickly righted Keva’s costume before anyone came close enough to see anything, but Keva felt her cheeks grow warm nonetheless.

She groaned as more people appeared, muttering a few swear words of her own at the interruption. Gage laughed and she playfully poked him in the stomach.

“It’s not funny,” she moaned, putting her forehead on his chest. “I ache.”

“Sweetheart, believe me, I know.” Gage took her hand and pulled it down to his crotch, the act hidden from wandering eyes by her voluminous skirts. She could feel the evidence of his arousal. “How long do you have to stay at this shindig?”

Keva sighed. “At least until after the auction is over.” She tilted her head up and kissed him lightly on the lips. “But the good thing is, I have a room here at the hotel.” Her heart thudded, knowing she was about to commit to a huge step in her relationship with Gage. Having sex was different from what she was about to ask. She didn’t think she could bear it if he gave the wrong answer to her question.

“Will you spend the night with me?”

All four books in this series received 5 angels and recommended reads from Fallen Angel Reviews:

“*Fantasies Delivered* is a wonderful tale of romance, hot passion, and one’s belief in love worth fighting for.”

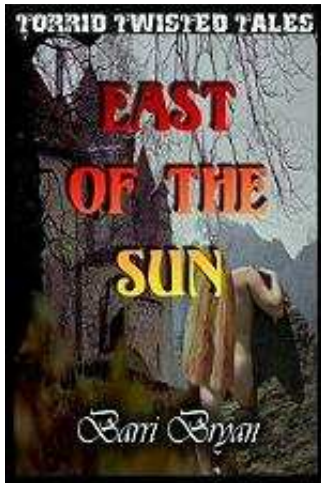
“*Fantasy Road* is an outstanding story, riddled with emotions, passion, suspense, and above all else amazing characters.”

“*Fantasies Undercover* sets the pages on fire with witty bantering and sizzling desires.”

“*Fantasies Forever*” contains sizzling chemistry, humor and a bit of suspense.”

Author's Books We Love Page: www.bookswelove.net/barribryan.php
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EAST OF THE SUN by Barri Bryan



Harold the woodcutter lived near the edge of a forest that some believed to be enchanted. He was an honest man, frugal and hardworking. Although he had few worldly possessions, he considered himself fortunate. He owned a sharp axe, a goat, a few chickens and a tiny cottage that stood in a clearing near a clump of gigantic oak trees. Greta, his wife of many years, was of a happy and contented disposition and they had three lovely daughters.

Opal, the eldest daughter, was tall and slender with a fair face, long blonde locks that cascaded down her back and eyes the color of a summer sky. She sang like a nightingale and often wished for a lute to strum as she warbled plaintive melodies.

Sable, the middle daughter, was slim and willowy with hair as dark as midnight, a peaches-and-cream complexion and eyes like soft brown velvet. She was an accomplished artist and often wished for oils and canvas instead of sketching on used paper with charcoal.

Pearl, the youngest daughter, was short and voluptuous. Her hair was as red as flame and her eyes were the color of cut emeralds. A dusting of freckles sprinkled themselves across her tiny, upturned nose. Pearl had no special talent, or so she believed. She was content to dream of Prince Charming who would someday come and carry her away to his castle.

Harold struggled daily to provide his family with food and clothing. He regretted that he had no extra money to buy the lute Opal wished for, or the oils and canvas Sable desired. As for Pearl, she seemed content to dream, which was probably the wisest course to pursue considering the family's poor outlook and poverty-stricken condition.

Who knows how long Opal would have wished, Sable would have desired, Pearl would have dreamed or Harold would have harbored regret had not fate stepped in to alter fortune and transform their destinies?

One Thursday evening in late autumn, Harold and his family sat beside a roaring fire in their warm kitchen. Harold smoked his pipe, Greta mended socks, Opal hummed softly,

Sable sketched a picture and Pearl stared into space. Outside, rain fell in torrents. A cold wind complained through the eaves of the little cottage. Quite suddenly and without notice, the residents heard a sharp rap-rap-rap on the back door. Harold struggled to his feet. “Who can that be?”

Greta looked up from her mending. “Some poor soul must be lost—and on a night such as this—hasten, husband, open the door and bid him enter.”

Rheumatism slowed Harold’s haste to a shuffling walk. He lifted the bar and opened the door just a fraction. To his utter amazement, a great brown bear stood on the back stoop of the little cottage.

In a deep, booming voice the big, wet, brown bear roared, “Good-evening to you.”

Harold was too surprised to do more than answer, “Good-evening to you, sir.”

Greta called, “Invite the poor sojourner to come inside and sit beside our cozy fire.”

Harold opened the door a little wider. “Would you like to come inside and sit with my family and me?”

That was all the invitation the brown bear needed. “I would be delighted.” He lumbered through the door and with heavy tread, came across the floor to stretch out very near the open fire. He was a magnificent creature, sleek and furry with huge paws, bright round eyes and little pointed ears. “I have traveled far and I am weary.”

Although they had little food, the kind woodcutter and his family shared their simple fare with the brown bear. As they dined on crusts of bread and porridge, Harold asked the brown bear why he was out on a night such as this.

The brown bear licked porridge from his lips. “I am on a mission.” He hung his shaggy head. “Alas, it is a difficult undertaking that lies before me.”

Harold was touched by the noble brown bear’s obvious suffering. “Is there some way I might be of assistance to you?”

The brown bear wiped one mammoth paw across his eyes. “There is one thing, but I am reluctant to ask for one of your treasured possessions.”

Harold had no worldly wealth and he quickly said so before adding, “What I have, you are welcome to take.”

The brown bear shifted his bulk. “Will you give me one of your daughters?” Before Harold could respond, he added, “If you will, you shall be as rich as you are now poor.”

Harold certainly had no objection to being rich. "I must ask my daughters about this." He turned to Opal, Sable and Pearl. "What say the three of you?"

Opal shook her shiny blonde head as she lowered her big blue eyes. "Father, I would gladly go, but I have aspirations of someday singing before lords and ladies in a great music hall." Raising her eyes, she smiled at the brown bear. "No offense, sir, but it would be a shame to deprive the world of my lovely singing voice."

The brown bear nodded his shaggy head. "That is true and I understand."

Harold addressed Sable, "What say you, daughter number two?"

Sable ran her finger through the sides of her long black tresses. "Father, I would gladly go, but I have the ambition to someday display my paintings in the king's great hall for the world to see. It would be a shame to deprive so many of that joy." She extended one hand in the brown bear's direction. "My talent belongs to the world."

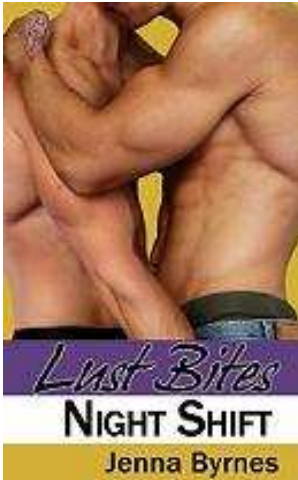
"So it does," the brown bear agreed. "I would never be so selfish as to deprive the masses of the pleasure of gazing on your paintings."

Harold cast a speculative glance in Pearl's direction. "What say you, daughter number three?"

Author's Books We Love Page: <http://www.bookswe love.net/byrnes.php>
 Author Jenna Byrnes' Website: <http://www.jennabyrnes.com/>
 Publisher's Website: <http://www.total-e-bound.com/>

NIGHT SHIFT by Jenna Byrnes

From Chapter One



Cullen Ryder stared at the TV in the homicide detective bullpen at his station house. Bernard Houtz, media spokesman for the chief of the Chicago Police Department, was giving a press conference outside city hall.

“We don’t have any suspects at this time, but I can’t go into further detail.”

The small group of officers surrounding the set murmured various comments, while their captain folded his arms across his uniformed chest. “We’ve called you down here to tell you we have nothing to tell you.” He looked at Ryder with a wry smile. “He could have put out a press release, but no.”

Ryder nodded and glanced back at the TV. Houtz was fielding questions in his own, inimitable style.

A well made-up blonde with a large microphone addressed the spokesman. “This makes ten murders. Are you saying the police don’t have *any* leads on the identity of the South Side Cleaner?”

The media crowd snickered, and Houtz raised his hands to quiet them. “The Chief does *not* think labelling this person the ‘South Side Cleaner’ is a good idea. To clarify, the Chicago Police Department is giving full attention to this matter. Effective immediately, the Chief has assigned top agents from an elite Special Task Force to the case.”

“Excuse me?” Ryder looked at his captain. “What ‘Special Task Force’?”

Captain Grainger took Ryder by the arm and motioned towards his office at the end of the large room. “Let’s talk.”

“Fuck me.” Ryder ran a hand through his shaggy mop of brown hair.

“Calm down.” Grainger guided him into the office. He closed the door and pointed to a chair.

Ryder sat. “This is *my* case. I’ve made some headway. My team is interviewing local business owners as we speak.”

“I was going to tell you about the task force. I’m not taking you off the case. You’ll be working with them.”

“*With* them or *for* them?” Ryder glanced through the large office window overlooking the bullpen and spotted three men in suits entering the station. The last two he’d never seen, but even though they’d never actually met, he recognized the large, black man in front. *Trevor Stone*. “No. Please don’t tell me *that’s* the task force.”

Grainger followed his gaze. “Trevor Stone, the one in front, is the only guy I know. The other two he brought with him.”

“Fuck me twice,” Ryder muttered.

With an exaggerated roll of his eyes, Grainger stepped to his door and called out, “Stone, in here.”

The detective nodded and headed in their direction.

“He’s been on the Vice Squad for quite a few years,” Grainger told Ryder. “He’s gotten several commendations. I’m not surprised the chief assigned him to this task force.”

“Oh, hell no.” Ryder wasn’t surprised, either, but he wasn’t happy. Stone looked like a big shot with testosterone and attitude to spare. There was no doubt who’d be running the case, now.

The man stepped into Grainger’s office, henchmen on his heels. “Captain.” Grainger extended a hand, and they shook. “Good to see you, Stone. We’re happy to get your help here in homicide.”

Happy. *Right*. Ryder watched the exchange with interest. Homicide and Vice cops only worked together when they were forced to, and it was never what could be described as ‘happy’. He continued to study the two men. The captain stood six foot two but didn’t tower over Stone. The darker skinned man wasn’t as wide but looked buff and muscular in his crisp, stylish suit. Stone’s closely cropped hair and chiselled cheek bones added to his cool façade.

There was something else Ryder couldn’t quite put his finger on. When it hit him, the idea sank in his stomach like a rock. *The man’s hot*. Ryder’s cock twitched, confirming the thought he tried to ignore. His already snug jeans grew tighter. He swallowed nervously. *What the fuck?* It was no secret he liked men, but his physical reaction to this guy surprised even him.

“I’d like to get a look at whatever you have on the case,” Stone told Grainger. “Do you have someplace we can work?”

Grainger pointed at the nearest wall. “Use the conference room next door. I’m having all the files delivered there now. Detective Ryder will bring you up to speed.”

“Fine.” Stone gazed coolly at Ryder. “Shall we get started?”

Ryder stood, mustering as much composure as possible. From here on out, he’d be known as the cop who couldn’t solve the South Side Cleaner case so the chief had to send in reinforcements. *Shit.*

“This way.” He prayed his erection had deflated, pissed he had one in the first place.

He felt the gazes on him of the other officers in the bullpen as he led the way to the war room. Centred in the space was a large conference table topped with a stack of folders.

My files.

It’s all about solving the case, he reminded himself. It shouldn’t matter who did it. The damned murderer needed to be stopped. Ryder ran his fingertips along the top file folder. *But it does matter.* Every cop knew how much it mattered.

“This will do fine.” Stone circled the room, examining the large whiteboard and the bulletin board suitable for pictures and clippings. He paused next to the table.

“Ryder, is it? This is Detective Moss.” He motioned towards the shorter of the two men, a redhead with thick, black-framed glasses.

“That’s Pickett,” Stone added, nodding towards the taller, blond beanpole.

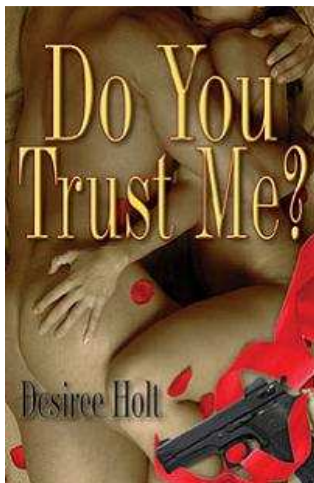
Ryder acknowledged each of them before facing Stone. “Anything you want to know, just ask. I’ve been working this case for two month. I’m familiar with the details.”

“Sounds like it’s time we brought in a fresh perspective.” Stone gazed at him. His eyes shone like glassy marbles, his lips parted in a slight pucker.

Ryder thought he could kiss the man or, just as easily, punch him in the nose. He wasn’t sure which would be more satisfying.

Author's Books We Love Page: <http://www.bookswelove.net/holt.php>
 Author Desiree Holt's Website: www.desireeholt.com
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DO YOU TRUST ME by Desiree Holt



What came next stunned her, freezing her in place. McCall put his wine glass down on the counter, reached for her and brushed his lips against hers. Just a brief contact but it seared her down to her toes. Her bones felt as if they were melting and she could have sworn the ground shifted beneath her feet.

Move, her inner voice commanded, but not one of her muscles would obey.

McCall traced the seam of her lips with his tongue, an artist's stroke painting the surface. A tiny sound whispered from her mouth. As if it was a signal he was waiting for, he captured her in a kiss so hot it burned her lips. His hands

cupped her face, holding her head in place, while he fed on her, his tongue pressing inside and tasting the texture of her flesh.

She gripped his wrists but not to pull them away. She couldn't have broken the kiss if someone paid her to.

Time stood still while he devoured every corner of her mouth, his fingers lean and hot against her cheeks. When he lifted his head his silver eyes had darkened almost to black.

Rina felt dazed and weak.

He studied her face, his breathing uneven. "Two choices. Either tell me to leave or tell me where your bedroom is."

She had trouble getting the words out. "Upstairs. Last door on the right."

Author's Books We Love Page: <http://www.bookswelove.net/old/jordan.html>
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 Publisher's Website: www.total-e-bound.com

LONG HARD TEXAN by Summer Jordan



Jake wanted to 'do it' today too, and he'd like to give Deanna more than a hand, but he was uneasy about fucking her brains out here, in this building. He'd heard that fear of exposure made sex more exciting, but he didn't think it would be smart to seduce Deanna in the supply room. How could they be certain a custodian wouldn't happen by or someone who worked here had forgotten something and would come back?

Lightning split the sky and thunder crashed almost simultaneously. Deanna jumped and stepped closer. "If you wouldn't mind, I really would like you to go with me to the supply room. I have to fetch some coloured background paper, and that storm is *really* close and a bit scary."

His cock grew hard just thinking about the possibilities of entering a room that was probably windowless and being alone with her. Deanna's breasts looked just the right size to fit in his hands, and her slender waist and flared hips were perfect in every way. She had a wonderful mouth for kissing with the most inviting, full lips he'd ever seen, and her emerald eyes were framed by dark lashes that contrasted with her light hair. The feature he particularly admired was her legs. Deanna reminded him of a filly with those long, long legs and flirty eyelashes. "No problem," he said, taking her hand.

Since Katy had run off with a ranch hand two months ago, he'd been skittish about getting mixed up with another woman, and with it hotter than Hades in south Texas right now, he'd found it a good time to visit his cousin. Katy hadn't been satisfied with dating, she'd wanted commitment—or so she told him over the telephone after she'd left town with an eager cowboy who'd placed an engagement ring on her finger. However, it wouldn't have made any difference when she told him since Jake wasn't interested in marriage. He'd seen too many fail, and the way his relationship with her had turned out was the way most ended. He'd been true to one woman for the past year, and now he wondered...for what? Of course he knew. Sex was the reason, and sex was what he wanted from Deanna. At least she already knew there could be no commitment involved. No ties. No future. Just good old rolls in the hay. She knew he was here for a short time and they'd satisfy one another while they could.

He'd been drawn to her like flies on a mare, and Craig had told him not to worry. Deanna was on the career track and as opposed to ties with a man as Jake was with a woman. So Jake decided that morning when he got up that he'd make his move today. "I'm only going to be here a couple of weeks so I need to quit wasting time," he'd told himself in front of the mirror in Craig's guest bedroom.

He ought to ask her out to dinner and maybe a movie and hope she'd be interested in a nightcap and maybe more than just a goodnight kiss. That was the dating routine. Everyone knew that. But he'd prefer to skip the rigmarole and get right down to business if that was okay with her. But it was unlikely she'd agree. Women didn't like to admit they wanted sex, and if they did own up to it, they called it 'making love'.

Now that Deanna was leading him to the supply room, he couldn't help but wonder if sex really was on her mind or if he'd misread her. He wasn't sure he could be alone with her and keep his hands off, but how could he say 'no' to her request to go with him? He smothered a chuckle. Why would he want to?

Outside, the clouds had let loose with a downpour, and his car was at the far end of the parking lot. Too late to turn back now—even if he'd wanted to. If she was ready to take a chance on what happened, so was he.

Rain pounded the roof of the single-story building and lightning flashed outside the offices they passed as they walked down the hall. Wind rattled the windows and Deanna shivered, but he had to give her an 'A' for courage. Letting go of her hand, Jake circled her waist with his arm. It slowed their steps, walking that way, but she didn't seem to mind.

When they reached the supply room, Deanna opened the door and turned on the light. More the size of a walk-in closet than a 'room', it was lined with shelves that were filled, leaving some boxes relegated to the floor. A big rack stood in the corner with rolls of coloured paper and a cutter for each one. A single ceiling bulb illuminated the area and Jake found it an unlikely place for fucking although he was certain they could find a way. There was something to be said for standing up while screwing. Or he could take a seat and offer her one on his cock.

A tremendous crash sounded behind them and Jake whirled. A blast of wind had blown out a window. Watching it shatter on the floor, he grabbed Deanna and pulled her inside the tiny room, away from the flying glass and pouring rain. Air rushing through the gaping hole slammed the door shut in their faces. Deanna screamed.

The light went out and she reached for Jake, putting her arms around him.

Everything happened at once. His penis, roused from the moment he'd laid eyes on her that afternoon, hardened to the point of pain at the feel of her body pressed against his. With an aching regret, he backed his hips away. He didn't want her to feel any more threatened than she already did.

“I don’t like close places, especially when they’re dark.” She pulled him tight against her and, laying her head on his shoulder, she dug her fingers into his biceps. If she’d noticed his hard-on, it didn’t worry her as much as their situation. “Turn on the light and open the door *now*. Please.”

She didn’t seem to get it that the electricity had gone off. “I’ll try but...” He flicked the switch a couple of times so she’d hear and understand.

“Damn.” She loosened her hold on him. “If you’ll just open the door? There’s a security light that comes on in the hall when there’s a power outage. I’ll feel better if I can at least see.”

If Jake hadn’t liked their situation—having the body of the woman he desired pressing against him—he would have tried that first. She was gaining control of herself though and her voice sounded stronger. The opportunity for a little groping of those inviting breasts and maybe even a comforting nuzzle of her pussy would end if he did what she asked, but he had no choice.

Fumbling for the handle, he tried to turn it. Nothing happened. He jiggled it. *Unbelievable*. “The door must have somehow locked, or else something is blocking it. It won’t open.”

“Blocking it? What are you talking about? Why did you close it behind you?” Her voice rose with a touch of panic.

Jake put his arms around her waist and dropped little kisses on her head. “I didn’t. The wind slammed the door shut.”

“There’s nothing in the hall that could block this door,” she protested.

Deanna was quiet for a moment and Jake savoured the feel of her body as he held her in his arms. He touched his lips to her cheek in a gentle kiss.

She smacked a palm against his chest. “I just remembered. It did this once before when Carla was in here, and she screamed bloody murder that she was locked in. She insisted Mr. Kelsay put a key in here to open it if the same thing happened again. Feel around for a nail by the door. The key should be on it.”

Jake did and there was no key. “No luck.”

Deanna, obviously sure he was wrong, checked too. “Some idiot must have forgotten to put it back,” she fumed after a lot of fumbling. “Do you have a cell phone?”

With regret, he realized she wasn’t going to give up and just enjoy this time alone with him. Next thing he knew, she’d probably want him to break the door down. “I left it in

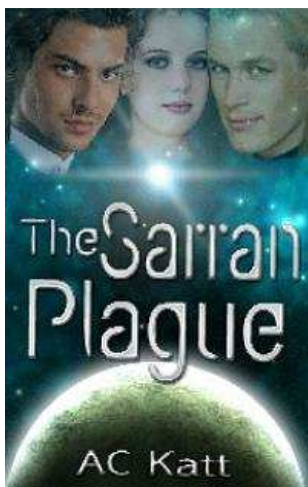
my car.” Her tension rubbed off on him. “I suppose yours is in your office. You could have brought it along since you knew the supply closet has a faulty door.”

“I didn’t know the power would go off and I wouldn’t be able to see and the key…”

“It’s no one’s fault,” he said, when she fell silent. “That’s my point, and since we’re going to be in here for a while, we might as well be friends. Agreed?”

Author's Books We Love Page: <http://www.bookswelove.net/katt.php>
 Author A.C. Katt's Website: <http://www.ackatt.com/>
 Publisher's Website: www.eternalpress.ca

THE SARRAN PLAGUE by AC Katt



“Even now in your flush of victory, we have sown the seeds of your defeat.”

Hanitz, Commander Zyptz Warrior Birds –Message to Brightstar

The Sarran Warriors came home from war to genocide. The Fleet arrived at the Sarran Home Planet to discover the enemy had unleashed a virus fatal to all fertile fems. The Sarrans mated in Triad, with their fems, their civilization ended.

For two cycles they searched the Galaxy for suitable replacements for the fems they lost. The Elders found Earth. The WarriorPairs left their homes with heavy hearts. The

Elders told them that the Earthen fems were an inferior species, unable to establish the psychic bond that was the heart of Sarran civilization

Yet from as far out as the asteroid belt, fem voices called to the mates. They were in pain, they were dying, they had met the enemy.

Admirals Jonal and Tonas were determined to obtain their fem at almost any cost; because they had already mated in her mind.

A single death is a tragedy; a million deaths is a statistic.

- Joseph Stalin
Earth, July 12th

Twenty-six-year-old pediatric resident, Anya Forrest, laid alone in Manhattan General Medical Center ICU. Her reddish blond hair hung limply about her face. Only her icy blue eyes were visible under the respirator mask. Her heart and liver were failing, and her skin had acquired the same bluish-yellow tinge as the urine stain on the wall.

Anya was terminal. Four weeks ago, she should have been moved to a hospice—a sunny, peaceful place to die. But there were too many patients and too few staff to give palliative care.

Therefore, Anya stayed in ICU, hypnotized by the plip-plop of the IVs and lulled by a cacophony of digital breath. The pain was intense. She knew she wasn't going to make it

when Mark Stern, the Chief of Staff, had stopped by her bed and asked if she needed anything. That was three days ago, when she could still speak.

She remembered how it began. It was the Fourth of July. She had taken a break and joined some of the staff on the hospital roof to watch the fireworks...

***Sarran Calendar: Cycle 9435: Barren Trion, Rising 92
Earth, July 4th, eight days before***

Fireworks filled the night sky across the United States of America. It was Independence Day. Aerial shells burst, scattering shooting stars in red, then white and blue. Layer cakes—combinations of sandwiched shells— sent up a rainbow of colors to burst in the sky. Peonies, threaded stars of fire and chrysanthemums, peonies with tails and willows, lit the night sky. Roman candles sent up arcs of shooting stars. There were waterfalls, fountains, and specials designed to imitate the planets of the solar system. Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn exploded into the sky.

The finale was Blue Earth—triple rocket fountains surrounded the rotating sphere, highlighting this year's theme of environmental awareness.

Celebrants spotted a magnificent explosion in the upper atmosphere. They looked up at the fiery disk. It was a show-stopping display. Everyone agreed that green mist was an apropos finale, until, that is, they noticed it became a slimy oil-like substance on their skin. Breaking news headlines streamed across CNN. Banners shrieked from print. Talk shows spoke slime 24/7. Environmental groups expressed outrage. The EPA investigated, and Congress planned hearings. The executive branch had no comment.

It was a two-day media fest. Then the NYPD nabbed a serial killer on July 6th. Someone leaked photos of twenty-six naked women stacked like cord wood in a New York City townhouse basement. The killer was a local politico with DC connections. Some of the women were prominent socialites. The arresting officers appeared on all the morning shows. One network producer threw together a special series on American serial killers. Green slime slipped off the national radar screen, and America went back to business as usual.

Individuals in the three lettered agencies noted the official non-response. Information was on a need-to-know basis. It seemed no one needed to know. The rather curious story should have had longer legs. No UFO claims, no conspiracy theories, nothing on the airwaves. The guys in intelligence were very nervous. Analysts were information junkies. There was no information outside of the initial reports. In the aftermath the dots connected. By July 7th, the agencies still awaited the second shoe. It had to drop; it was a matter of when. As usual, the public had no clue.

The first cases hit the hospitals the evening of the seventh. The virus took forty-eight hours to incubate. Another twenty-four passed before full onset of symptoms. On July 7th, at 21:00 hours, hospitals became holding facilities. On July 21, the Centers for

Disease Control in Atlanta provided the media with maps of the infected areas. Every state reported Plague, even Alaska and Hawaii. There was no time progression. No sunburst pattern to suggest an initial area of contamination. No case zero. It started everywhere, at once. No one asked questions. They were too busy trying to survive. Reports from CNN showed the rest of the planet in the same condition. No outside help was available to anyone. Everyone tried to save their own.

By the end of six weeks, fifty percent of the female population was infected. The CDC named it mixed immune response syndrome. The public called it the Plague. It was a virus, and symptoms varied. All known autoimmune diseases combined in strange variations. Lupus, multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, mixed connective tissue disease, rheumatoid arthritis, asthma, and diabetes marched in terrible lock step. The possible combinations were mind-boggling. The victims were all female.

The National Institutes of Health compiled statistics that linked Plague to ovulation. It ignored prepubescent, post menopausal and sterile women and struck only the fertile. Someone had manufactured the Plague. It underwent constant mutation. There was no apparent cure or treatment.

Author's Books We Love Page: <http://bookswelove.net/knight.php>
 Author Dee S. Knight's Website: <http://deesknight.com>
 Publisher's Website: <http://www.liquidilverbooks.com/>

HEARTS AFIRE by Dee S. Knight



[Beth and Harm are having a dinner meeting at her house. He just heard her say that men are trouble and she wished she could juts rent one for sex now and then.]

She continued whisking. “It’s impolite to sneak up on someone.”

“I’m glad I did or I wouldn’t know what you really want in life.”

She did turn at that. The aroma of grilling meat wafted inside and her stomach rumbled. “Is my steak overcooking while you’re here offering your services?”

His eyes softened. “Darlin’, your steak is just fine.” His lips turned up, displaying those dimples that turned her insides to mush.

“That’s so unfair,” she blurted out. “You’re glib and good looking and confident. And you’ve got those damn dimples. I’m not prepared to deal with you.”

His smile faded. “I’m not playing with you, Beth. I haven’t been able to get you off my mind since yesterday morning.”

“Oh, Lord.” Flustered, she swiveled to lean on the counter. “How are we ever going to work out the negotiations?”

He didn’t come forward and wrap his arms around her as she wanted him to so badly. Her body burned for his. The *negotiations*? After what they’d just said to each other, how would they get through their talks tonight?

“Beth.” He still spoke from the other side of the room. “We’re going to do what we need to for those people counting on us because that’s the kind of people we are. But I don’t see that that means we can’t enjoy getting to know each other.”

She laughed shakily. “You’re a better man than I am.”

“I hope so.”

That made her laugh outright. She took the salad from the refrigerator. “I promise not to rip your clothes off over the salad.”

“Damn.”

They smiled at each other. He took the salad and headed back out. “The steaks will be ready in about five minutes.”

She followed him with butter, the dressing and plates and silverware. Minutes later, under a sun dipping behind purple-edged clouds, they sat down to eat.

Harm took one bite of salad and whooped. “Darlin’, that is hot. I love it.”

“I’m happy I pleased you.”

“Oh, there’s no question of that.”

“You’re bad.”

“I’m bad,” he quipped, unabashed.

“Now that we agree on something,” she said, smiling. “I want to tell you what I found out about Carter Communications.”

“They’re sons of bitches who put out a piss-poor radio. But go ahead, I can be fair.”
“That’s so obvious,” she said wryly. She opened the manila folder. “I spoke with the mayors of four cities that bought Carter’s radios. They all had problems.”

“I hate to say I told you so but--“

“And Carter satisfied their issues in short order, removing any concerns.”

“Really?” Harm genuinely looked surprised, a piece of blood-rare steak speared on his fork halfway to his mouth.

“That’s what they told me. I questioned each one at length about how the equipment worked before the fix and what the specific problem turned out to be, how long they had to wait for help and how much it cost them. They all expressed happiness with Carter Communications and the equipment as it worked now.”

“Do you mind if I ask which cities you talked to?” His forehead creased with concern and he put the fork back on the plate.

“Not at all. Atlanta, Indianapolis...” She consulted her notes. “Springfield, Missouri and Greenville, South Carolina. I was going to ask if you wanted to talk with some

firefighters in those cities and see what you find out.”

Harm crinkled his brow and sat back, studying her. “I was going to ask if you’d *mind* if I did that. Excuse my confusion, but aren’t you supposed to be fighting me on our demands?”

“I want what’s best for the city. The fire department is part of the city.” She shrugged. “One doesn’t exclude the other.”

“It might if it means having to spend another few hundred thousand dollars.”

Brow creased, she nibbled her bottom lip. “I hope it won’t come to that, but if it does, how could I live with myself if anything happened to you because I squabbled over money?”

He sat quietly, staring at her. There was no hint of what he was thinking, what he was feeling. I’ve stepped in it now, she thought.

“Wh-what I mean is, I want your equipment to be working properly.”

“Believe me, everything I have is in good working order. I’ve got to get out of here.”

Beth could only grip the table and shake her head. “I apologize. I never intended this evening to move in this direction.”

“I know that,” he said, standing. Stacking his salad bowl on his plate, he picked them up. He grabbed the two bottle necks between his fingers and took everything into the house. Hurriedly, Beth gathered the rest of what was on the table, tucked her folder under her arm and rushed inside after him. God, she’d messed up everything, her job and whatever had started to develop between her and Harm.

“Where are you going?”

“Home, Darlin’.”

“Why? We...we have more to talk about. I promise not to make any more suggestive comments.” She put her plate on the counter and turned, right into a wall of man.

Harm framed her head in his big, warm hands and pressed his lips to hers. As a kiss, she rated it fifteen on a scale from one to ten. Her knees threatened to buckle. One of his arms snaked around her waist.

“Steady,” he murmured, gaining a quick breath before taking hers away again. Angling his head fit their lips together even better. His tongue traced her lips; she opened and he surged in.

On a moan, she slid her hands up his arms and around his neck. Harm crushed her against him. Rational thought eluded her, something that hadn't happened in the middle of coitus with two of her previous lovers. How had this magnitude of sensation escaped her all these years?

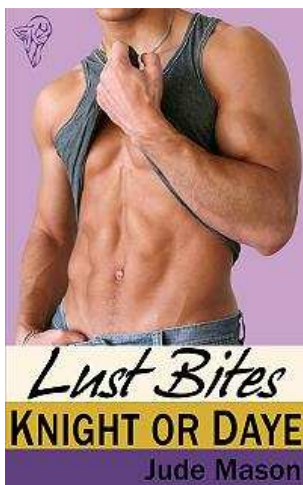
Instinctively, she lifted her leg to his thigh, rising on tiptoes and trying to fit her heat against the long, hard length that pressed into her stomach.

Slowly, he pulled away, dropping kisses along her jaw, her cheeks, her forehead. Then he exhaled a shaky breath and rested his forehead on hers.

“I was leaving before I did that.”

Author's Books We Love Page: <http://www.bookswelove.net/mason.php>
 Author Jude Mason's Website: <http://www.my-haven2001.com/>
 Publisher's Website: <http://www.total-e-bound.com/>

KNIGHT OR DAYE by Jude Mason



Jeremy Knight lives with, and is in love with, Sam, a man who hides his submissive nature until one fine evening he asks Jeremy to dominate him. Jeremy is shocked, but does go along with his lover's request. It goes well, perhaps too well, overwhelming Jeremy. He leaves, gets wildly drunk and decides he can't abide the behaviour. Returning home, he tells Sam this and Sam pushes his sub side down, for awhile. He finally can't take it and leaves.

Devastated, Jeremy does some soul searching and discovers that perhaps Sam's desires weren't all that horrible. His own dominant side shows itself and he does as much research as he can to find himself.

Then he must find Sam. A cop friend of Jeremy's sees Sam in the company of 'someone of interest' to the police. Nathaniel Daye: a very wealthy man who owns and sells people. The only trouble is, they've never been able to prove it. When Jeremy decides to get into the picture, he winds up as the newest 'boy' in Nathaniel's house. He finds Sam, who has fallen for another slave named Peter.

Can Jeremy rekindle the love Sam had for him? How will Peter fit into the picture? Can Jeremy find a way to rescue them all? Or will Daye win?

Excerpt:

Jeremy Knight stood outside of his lover's door, his hands clenched at his sides, thinking about knocking, but not quite sure he was ready. Dark wood, marred at the bottom by water damage, was discoloured around the brass doorknob by what looked like years of handling. Beside a tall oak, two guards stood talking. On the other side of the drive, Jeremy knew there were others.

He looked back at the door. "Could use some TLC," he mumbled and shifted from one foot to the other. The thong pulled tight up the crack of his ass. He squirmed, trying to readjust the strap without actually using his hands. It didn't work. He knew it wouldn't.

He looked at the door again and took a deep breath. It was now or never. Standing there any longer wasn't going to help his indecisiveness. He raised his hand and knocked.

Stepping back, he waited and his heart raced. He crossed his hands in front of himself, gripping one wrist. Head lowered, he eased his feet apart, shoulder width. His decision was making itself known.

Jeremy watched the rise and fall of his chest, and worked on his patience. His hands grew slippery with sweat. His jeans felt too tight, his tank even tighter. The boots weighed a ton when he moved his feet. He clenched his fist then straightened his fingers, stretching them, trying to distract himself. Jumbled thoughts and desires plagued him. His cock pulsed, and he wanted to sooth the dull ache he'd been trying to ignore for the last hour.

Footsteps approached from inside.

Should he bolt, flee for his freedom?

He lifted his gaze, just enough to see the doorknob turn. The scarred door swung open, and he saw Nathaniel's long, jean clad legs, his groin. Jeremy looked down, focusing on the man's feet. His mouth went dry.

"You finally decided to knock," Nathaniel said in the satin soft tone he knew made Jeremy shudder. Jeremy had told him often enough. Three months of telling.

"Yes. I didn't realise you knew I was here."

"Course I did. I watched you drive in. I watched you come up to the door."

Again, Jeremy shifted his weight from one foot to the other, incredibly aware of the thong holding his crotch a little too tightly. He forced his hands to remain where they were, not to tug at the too-fucking-tight cup, or the strap between his butt cheeks.

"Would you like to come in?" Nathaniel stepped aside and pushed the door wide.

Jeremy looked up, meeting Nathaniel's deep-set brown eyes for the first time. "Yes..." The next word would seal it.

Nathaniel didn't push, didn't rush him into saying it. He didn't have to. He simply stood and looked ahead, eyes wide, a smile on his face.

"Yes, Sir," Jeremy got out. If he'd thought his mouth was dry a few moments ago, it now resembled the Sahara.

"Excellent, I'm glad you made your decision."

Nathaniel really did sound pleased, and that made Jeremy's entry into the man's impressive home somewhat easier. Jeremy came from the *other* side of the tracks and wasn't used to the finer things. Nathaniel was showing it to him, along with a lot of other things. Jeremy was enjoying it all. Some of the new experiences he was beginning

to crave. Others, like his stepping across the threshold into a new life, he wanted so much he could taste it, but he feared it as well. He was here to do a job. He was here for Sam.

“Thank you, Sir.” His voice trembled. So did his hands. Fear, excitement, lust, all of them and more tore at him.

“I think before we go any further, I’d like you to strip out of those outer clothes.” Nathaniel turned and walked deeper into the house, heading for the large living room.

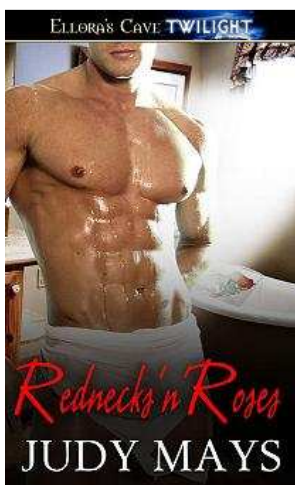
Jeremy thrust his hands down to the bottom of his too tight tank top and skinned it up over his head. Belly and chest bared, his nipples tightened in the sudden freedom of nakedness. He sucked in a deep breath and unfastened his jeans, thrusting them down over his hips, thighs, letting them drop to the floor. He sat down, the dark wood floor cool on his butt. The thong, in all its brilliant white glory, pulled even tighter when he strong-armed his boots and socks off, then wrestled out of his jeans. He pushed his clothing into a pile, the boots under the rest, and climbed to his feet again. The strap cutting into his ass crack sawed over the sensitive skin.

For a moment, he simply stood there, unsure of whether or not he could follow Nathaniel. Alone, he reached back and tugged the strap free then let it settle in. The cup managed to cradle his balls, but an inch or more of his cock shaft and the crown poked over the top. The hard-on angered him. Yet, he knew his excitement was in response to Nathaniel’s ultra-dominance.

“Fuck!” He strode after the man, his lover, his adversary.

Author's Books We Love Page: <http://www.bookswelove.net/mays.php>
 Author Judy Mays' Website: <http://www.judymays.com/>
 Publisher's Website: <http://ellorascave.com/>

REDNECKS 'N ROSES by Judy Mays



Mandi stepped back as the big sheriff stomped towards her. He knew about Midnight? “Do you know Amber?”

Stopping in front of her, he nodded. “I’m Brad Keister, Rusty’s cousin.”

Mandi choked on her laugh. *Keister? His last name is Keister? That’s almost as bad as Nipple. What’s next? Somebody named Boob?*

He stuck out his hand.

She stepped back.

The rose bush grabbed her ass again.

“Ouch, damn it!” Mandi jumped forward and landed against his torso.

He grasped her upper arms to steady her. “What’s wrong?”

Flattening her hands against his chest, she spread her fingers wide. My oh my oh my. This chest was all hard muscle.

“You okay?”

“What?” Mandi looked up and fell into a pair of eyes the color of a storm tossed ocean.

Her senses practically shut down. There were no sounds except his breathing, no scents except his - hot and male. She felt only his body against hers; she was blind to everything except him, the sheriff, Brad Keister.

Mandi tried to blink and couldn’t, tried to wrench her gaze away and couldn’t. One look into his eyes, and she was lost. She’d fallen in over her head, and some part of her consciousness knew it. Secrets swirled in the blue depths of his eyes, dark secrets that would never be revealed to the light of the sun, dark secrets that sank their roots into the very depths of his soul – and hers. She fell even deeper into his stare.

He blinked.

Mandi watched his eye lids fall, noted his long, dark lashes, and felt the subtle spell that had gripped her fade away.

His lips moved.

Her sense of hearing returned as his hands tightened on her upper arms.

“Are you okay?”

His fresh, male scent swirled around her.

She blinked, then blinked again.

Her voice came out in a breathy whisper. “Yes.”

White teeth flashed in a grin.

“You going to stop rubbing my chest then?”

Mandi blinked again. More of her senses returned.

Her finger tips tingled, and she wrenched her gaze from his face to his chest where she was tracing slow circles around the buttons on his shirt pockets.

His muscles jumped beneath her hands.

Gasping, she jumped back away from him – right back into the rose bush. It slapped her ass.

“Damn it!” She leaped forward into his arms and grabbed his shoulders. Hooking her ankles together behind his back, she wrapped her legs around his waist.

As the force of her leap caused him to step back, Brad wrapped one arm around her slender waist and the other at the top of her thighs, just below her ass. This was by far the craziest woman he’d ever met. Still, she felt pretty good wrapped around him like this, her crotch pressed tightly against his abdomen. Maybe, if she shifted, she’d slide a little lower.

He spread his fingers over the side of her rib cage. “If you wrap your legs around every man you meet, there must be a lot of happy men in the world.”

“Put me down!”

Leaning his head back, he cocked an eyebrow and smiled at her. “You’re the one who jumped on me.”

Her face was full of consternation. “That’s because I backed into a rosebush, you idiot!”

Brad slid the arm up against her ass. Something pricked his wrist.

“Ouch!” She squashed her breasts against his chest and wrapped her arms around his neck.

Damn but she felt good. Too bad he was wearing a shirt. The thought of her hard nipples rubbing against his bare chest sent a shiver dancing down his spine.

Unhooking her ankles, she tried to lower her legs. However, Brad kept his left arm locked against her right thigh and under her buttocks so she was only able to lower one leg. He didn’t want to let her go just yet. It had been too long since he’d had his arms wrapped around a squirming woman.

He chuckled. “You have a thorn in your butt.”

“I know that,” she hissed in his ear. “Put me down so I can get it out.”

“I wouldn’t be much of a public servant if I didn’t help you.” Sliding his hand over her behind, he cupped and squeezed her ass cheek.

“Get your hands off my ass, or I swear I’ll go Mike Tyson on you and bite your ear off.” Her warm breath slid past his ear and swirled around the back of his neck.

Warmth pooled deep in his stomach.

Brad’s imagination began to run wild. If she’d bite his ear, what else would she bite? His canine teeth began to ache even more, and he had to concentrate to keep them from growing.

Then, without any warning, his cock twitched.

Brad froze.

She wiggled against him. More warm breath meandered over his ear lobe.

His cock stirred again.

Breathless, he waited – waited for the familiar rush of blood and tightening of his balls.

It didn’t come.

Still, joy flooded his body. His cock had moved. This woman in his arms, Amber's friend, had made his cock move. It wasn't dead.

He squeezed her ass once more.

She dug her nails into the back of his shoulders. "Quit feeling me up and put me down, or I'll sue you for harassment."

"You're the one harassing me." He slid his fingers to the thorn and nudged it.

She growled in his ear.

"It's in deeper than I thought. Hold on," he murmured. One quick yank had it out. Immediately, he rubbed his thumb against the spot.

"Put – me – down, or I swear I *will* bite you." She unlocked her legs from around his waist.

Please, bite me. "You've threatened an officer of the law – twice," Brad answered with a chuckle. "That's a felony."

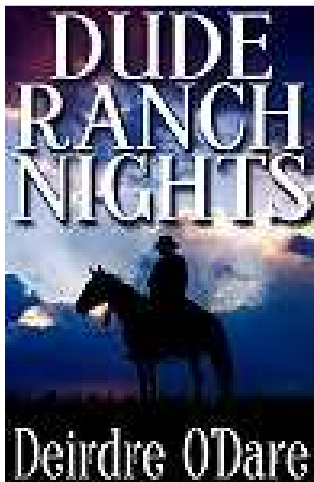
Bracing her hands on his shoulders, she arched her back against his arm and stared at him. That pressed her crotch even more firmly against him. "I what? Are you nuts?"

Grinning into her angry face, Brad finally loosened his hold and let her slide to the ground. If she'd been pissed before, she was spitting mad now. But that didn't matter. Nor did it matter that his cock was hanging limp against his leg. He'd felt it move, and this woman had caused it. He and she were going to become much, much better acquainted.

He stepped back, propped his hands on his hips, and said, "What's your name again?"

Author's Books We Love Page: <http://www.bookswelove.net/odare.php>
 Author Deirdre O'Dare's Website: www.deirdreodare.com
 Publisher's Website: <http://www.amberquill.com/>

DUDE RANCH NIGHTS by Deidre O'Dare



Unused to western riding, C.J. had to concentrate on keeping her seat and yet not getting her butt pounded at the trot. The familiar posting mode was not possible with the long stirrups. However, she already sensed this would be easier on her legs for a long ride such as they were apparently going to make. It didn't take her long to settle into the new style. Her unusual mount had smooth, easy gaits, whether at the walk or the trot.

Cam's stiff posture indicated he was still miffed with her. He never once looked back, but pushed his mount on up a zigzagging trail. It appeared to lead to the top of a loaf-shaped mountain that now loomed over them with a beetling brow of dark cliffs. C.J. tied the reins together and draped them over the saddle horn in order to snap a few pictures. She thought Josie was trustworthy enough to follow Cam's horse without any direction for a few minutes.

Back home it would be hard to describe or even recall the blueness of the sky, the crystal clarity of the dry air, or the wild scents of the native foliage, most of which was totally unfamiliar to her. Although harsh, the scenery had a unique but undeniable beauty all its own.

Already she was moved by the curious enchantment of the high desert. The handsome man on his powerful horse added to the charm.

He might act aloof but I'll bet I can bring him around.

Right now he was an enigma. He spoke mostly in cultured tones, using correct grammar and very few of the cowboy idioms she'd heard in the movies. Yet in appearance he merged perfectly with the environment, in his element on horseback and in the wilds.

She noticed the rifle in a leather scabbard slanting along his mount's right side beneath his stirrup strap. It hung so he could grab the rifle and swing off with a single motion. *Can there be a real need to be armed? He did say there were wild animals, though--predators.* A frisson of mixed excitement and anxiety danced down her spine. She cast an anxious look around her, almost expecting to see a tawny puma crouched beneath one of the squatty evergreens or a bear in a thick clump of brush.

When she realized Josie had fallen behind while she was absorbed in her photography, C.J. heeled the mule firmly in an effort to get closer to the big horse and his rider. If they disappeared from view, she knew she would be lost in moments. That was a daunting notion. Although she could catch an occasional glimpse of the green grove where the ranch sat far below, the way back was not clear. Perhaps she could follow the trail, yet it was but the dimmest trace in some spots, easy to miss.

In short, she was completely dependant on Cameron Greenway and his knowledge of this country. She was not at all sure she liked that and yet, was it not what she'd come for? His blatant masculinity itself was a challenge to her, a taunt which made a prickly heat flash through her body, starting a tingle in her crotch where she pressed against the smooth leather of her saddle. *Before I leave here, I will have... No, I expect he'll have me, but that'll be the wildest adventure of all.*

* * * *

Cam didn't rein Curly in until they reached the top of the mountain looming over the ranch, working up through a notch in the black basalt cliffs that edged the rim. From that vantage point, he turned to watch his guest. Bunching solid muscles, Josie dug sturdy hooves into the loose rubble and scrambled gamely up the last steep stretch of the trail. Cam noticed C.J. gave her mount plenty of rein and held on, letting the mule take her time and pick her exact path. That was wise. At least she'd listened to what he'd said, a good sign.

C.J. checked Josie right beside him. So far the blonde looked as pert and perky as ever. For a socialite, which she obviously was, she was holding up surprisingly well. She made a slow turn in her saddle and scanned the panorama spread out below. The whole San Domingo valley meandered before them, edged on the far side by the Crook Range, a jagged, bluish-brown border against the turquoise sky.

"Oh, my!" She drew in a deep breath and let it out slowly. "This is incredible. How far is it to those mountains on the other side of the valley?"

Cam shrugged. "About fifty miles. Distances are deceptive here because the air is so clear. The humidity is no more than fifteen percent today, if that, and we haven't had a lot of wind the past week to stir up dust. That's unusual this time of year, but welcome, of course. So this is about as good a view as you'll ever get from this particular lookout point."

"It's amazing. I'm afraid photography won't do it justice, but I have to try. I'm sure no one at home will believe me when I describe it otherwise."

"No, probably not. You won't find a vista like this very far east of the Rockies. That's what I love about Arizona, among other things. It's still unspoiled, almost like no one has ever been here before you."

Her green gaze flicked from the scenery to him. "Have you always lived here in the southwest?"

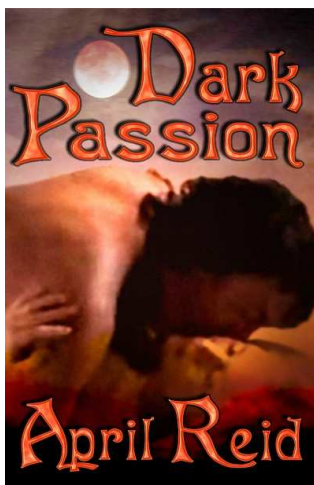
"Most of my life. I went back east to school for a while, but I couldn't stay there. Too confining, too many people, too many rules, restrictions and restraints. It almost made me claustrophobic."

She nodded. "Oh, I understand. Uncle Rene was fond of travel. A century ago he'd have been an explorer. When I reached my late teens, I started going with him in the summers, and I loved it. From then on, home was merely a place to prepare for the next expedition. I couldn't bear to stay there too long. He died in February in a plane crash, and I saw my whole life turning into a petrified, stultified, ossified exhibition of nothingness!"

For a long moment, they looked at each other. Something undefined but very powerful flowed between them, the spark of an unexpected kinship, a surprising rapport. Cam thought about bending forward to touch his lips to hers, curved now in a genuine smile. So sweetly tempting...

Author's Books We Love Page: <http://www.bookswelove.net/reid.php>
 Author April Reid's Website: www.april-reid.com
 Publisher's Website: www.amberquill.com/

DARK PASSION by April Reid



Against his better judgment, he closed the two paces between them and clasped her fingers. “Will you trust me to get us through safely?”

Her fingers flexed in his hand. “Always,” she said in a throaty tone that evoked thoughts of bodies mating on silken sheets in the warm darkness.

With the determination that had carried him through the death of his father and his own rise to sultan—through the tangle of promises and lies in the politics of The Council of The Divan—Rahim led Alyssa to their destination, touching only her hand and wrist.

Soon, they stood on the lip of a shallow, circular valley carved during the retreat of a long-ago glacier. The hanging valley was filled with a fantasy of pools set like steps and connected by narrow waterfalls. Wisps of steam hung over the topmost pool. The next level down held water that churned and foamed, lit from within by a pale green hue.

On the third step down, a placid pool reflected back both moons.

“It’s beautiful,” Alyssa said, her voice filled with awe. “Thank you for bringing me here.”

Releasing her hand from his fingers, she took one more step forward and stopped. A fitful breeze played with her hair and pressed the kut’n clothes against her slender curves.

With no warning, untamed water dabblers crept out of the darkness and gathered around her feet, softly chirring to each other.

Rahim drew his sword, ready to slay any that raised a claw to threaten her. Then he saw younglings clinging to the back of their mothers and paused. Among the water-dragosaurs, children and their mothers were protected from violence unless they were attacked. Tonight, all the adults, male and female, kept their claws retracted in a sign of peace.

Alyssa smiled down at her admirers. In a gentle tone, she said, “Welcome, protectors of the waters. Will you help me call a blessing this night?”

There was a stirring among the animals. A male with silvery-blue scales and gold markings around its muzzle pressed through the crowd to face her. Beside him walked a silvery-green female with two babies on her back.

Standing on his long hind legs, the alpha male and his mate gazed at Alyssa. He plucked one baby from the female and stroked its head and back tenderly. The youngling yawned and flicked its small tongue in and out between two rows of tiny teeth. Bending his face closer to his son, the father flicked his tongue in and out between two rows of much larger, dagger-like teeth.

With a deep chirring sound, he lifted the baby up toward Alyssa.

Smiling, she accepted the infant dabbler, its blue and silvery-green body no longer than her hand. It wrapped its slender prehensile tail around her wrist, the same way it had held onto its mother’s tail.

As she stroked its supple, long neck, she said to the alpha couple, “Your children are beautiful.”

The chief male and female each dipped its head as if acknowledging the compliment.

The youngling rested its green muzzle on Alyssa’s cupped fingers. His mouth opened and the little silver tongue flicked out, tasting the air, tasting her skin.

Alyssa raised her hand until she and the youngling were nose to nose. With one finger, she stroked the soft, shimmering scales on its head and back.

Again, the youngling’s tongue flicked out. This time it licked her finger.

Imitating the adult dabbler, Alyssa flicked her tongue in and out close to the baby’s face.

It made a soft, contented sound, and nestled in her hand, its eyes slowly closing.

Kneeling in front of the alpha male and his mate, Alyssa tenderly transferred the baby to the mother’s back.

As she remained on her knees, surrounded by the water-dragosaurs, she held out her right hand, palm upward, to the alpha female.

Rahim’s fingers closed on his belt dagger—just in case.

The female peered into Alyssa’s face as if searching for some sign. Slowly the dabbler laid one paw in the outstretched hand, and grew motionless.

The other dabblers ceased their low chirring. Instead, all attention focused on the female and Alyssa.

Rahim sensed a stirring in the psychic plane. A presence, far different than any he'd ever felt, brushed his mind.

Alyssa gave a low cry. Tears gathered on her cheeks, but her face glowed with an inner light and her aura pulsed in the clear gold of wisdom and the emerald green of empathy.

The water-dragosaurs bobbed their heads and murmured among themselves in subdued tones of respect.

Who is she? Rahim wondered. How does a woman from a small village in Oceanus, forced into slavery, call water from the depths of the planet and now command the respect of wild water-dragosaurs?

She was a mystery—one he intended to solve.

At that moment, Alyssa rose to her feet and moved closer to the brink of the valley of pools.

The water-dragosaurs seemed to flow around her feet in a moving wave of greens, blues, silver, gold, and jewel-tone reds.

She raised both hands shoulder high, her fingers cupped as if to catch the moonlight.

Rahim's heart swelled with awe. His scalp prickled and his breath came out in a rush at the renewed flow of psychic winds.

Alyssa tipped her head back and closed her eyes, as if listening to the land. "I can feel the power here...and the peace," she murmured.

"The goddess has made this a place of healing and renewal—and new beginnings."

A low *chirr* rippled through the dabblers. Quietly, they turned and slipped away into the sheltering brush and trees.

The psychic winds receded. Once more, the land pulsed with the splash and flow of the small waterfalls dropping into the string of pools. Tree peepers sang as they flitted through the night. In the distance, wolves yipped and howled, moving farther away.

Worried now by how the rush of psychic energies might have caused Alyssa harm, Rahim took a silent step forward to where she continued to stand in worship.

Quietly, he said, "Alyssa?"

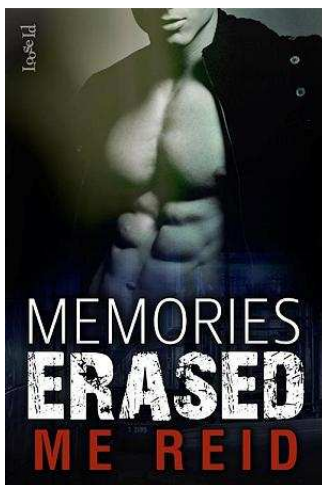
She lowered her hands and turned to face him, a smile playing on her lips. “Let’s honor this gift of the goddess and go play in the water.”

The light of playful intelligence in her eyes proved she had come through unscathed and whole.

With his relief came a surge of desire so strong, he could only stand rigidly as he struggled against the blinding need to tear off her clothes, to inspect every inch of her body, to take her hard and deep, to mark her as his mate, and...

Author's Books We Love Page: <http://www.bookswelove.net/sessions/mereid.php>
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MEMORIES ERASED by M. E. Reid



Ewyn sat up and hopped off the bed. He smiled as he moved across the floor, thinking about the ringtone programmed into Devin's cell to signal calls from him. "Adore," another Prince oldie, and Devin called him sweet? Clearly, Devin qualified as the sentimental one. Then again, he did have "Some Kind of Wonderful," a really old oldie by the Drifters as his ringtone for Devin's calls.

He came to a halt in front of the armoire and turned on the stereo. The smooth vocals of Dee Dee Bridgewater and the instrumental sounds of Braun, Whalum, and Brown filled the room with their rendition of "Let's Do It Again." He groaned, started to turn it off, then picked up the remote instead and headed back to bed. He did like this particular

jazz CD, and that specific song.

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Ewyn threw himself across the bed and tried to relax. He glanced at the clock. Shit. Eleven-thirty on Sunday night...he needed some sleep so he could function at work tomorrow.

He rolled off the bed and headed for the bathroom. He took a quick shower, donned his sweatpants, cranked up the music, and wandered into the kitchen. He flipped the light switch; a note and a business card stuck under a magnet on the refrigerator caught his

attention. He hurried across the room to examine them; he read the note first.

Carry card with you at all times...program number. Love you, D.

Brow furrowed, he looked at the information on the card, then smiled. Mick's card. He laid it on the counter next to the coffeemaker so he would remember to take it in the morning.

Damn, he loved Devin. The man had become manic about taking care of his every need.

Ewyn grabbed a mug from the cabinet, took milk from the refrigerator, and filled the mug. His mom used to give him warm milk when he couldn't sleep. *Hmm...* She added something to it. What... *Ooo...* vanilla and sugar. He found what he needed and added it to the milk, then popped it in the microwave. Couldn't hurt.

He grinned, remembering how Greg used to tease him about being a big baby, because even as a teen, he still drank his mother's potion, as his brother called it. Well, fuck...he *was* the baby.

Then there were his recent arguments with Devin over milk. Shit. The man changed everything else about his eating habits, but giving up his whole milk... Devin used that low fat, nonfat shit...*eww*. He refused to go there. Devin caved.

The microwave dinged.

Ewyn grabbed his mug. Warm milk in hand and still grinning, he turned off the lights and headed back to bed. He had just settled down when his cell rang. *Hell!* Who would be calling this late? Devin didn't call when out on assignment. Oh, shit. He hoped it wasn't the job calling to tell him the little fuckups in his department were at it again. He really needed to reassess the employees on the night shift. Damn.

He snatched up his cell, glanced at the caller ID, and almost threw the phone across the room.

Gareth.

Hand trembling, he stared at the phone. Was the man fucking crazy? Didn't Gareth know Devin would kill...wait a minute...*fuck!* Gareth knew. The only reason Gareth would have the balls to call him... How did Gareth know Devin wasn't there? He held the phone in a death grip, watching the backlight fade. Was Gareth having him watched?

Eyes moving from the phone to the doorway, he peered into the darkness of the other room. Nerves jangling, he jumped off the bed and headed for the front door to check the security latch.

He heard it then. Someone trying to jimmy the lock.

Heart tripping double time, he crept up to the door and eased the latch into place, then backed away. He stood paralyzed, watching the twisting doorknob.

Call the police –

Hell!

The problem with that scenario...his damn family would find out. They had ears and eyes everywhere. For sure, the shit would hit the fan.

Damn it.

Devin had both of his weapons on him; he'd watched Devin dress. He needed his own weapon. Patrick had had him handling a gun as soon as he could take a piss by himself.

Snapping out of his stupor, Ewyn turned and rushed into the kitchen. He picked up Mick's card, grabbed a knife from the block on the counter, and hurried back to the bedroom. He flipped open his cell while reaching for the remote; he turned off the stereo and pressed Mick's number.

No more cowering. Damn if he would go down that road again. Oh yeah...his ass was afraid, which only reinforced his determination to fight back. Who the hell did these people think they were fuckin' with? Losing touch with his roots had been a short-term aberration. Never again. With backup, he would be good to go.

“Yo.”

“Mick...”

“Yeah.”

“It's Ewyn. Devin gave me your card.”

“Hey, babe. What's up? Tired of Devin, want a real man?”

Ewyn tried for a laugh; it came out like a catch in his breathing.

“Ewyn... What’s wrong?”

“I need help. Can’t call the cops... Dev’s gone, I’m unarmed...” Damn. Babbling.
“Mick... Someone’s trying to get into the condo.”

“Shit! On my way. Hang tight.”

Ewyn closed his cell with a snap and leaned back against the headboard. Shivering, he pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them. Knife in one hand, he clutched his cell in the other. The scratching at the door seemed louder.

Would they try to break in since he didn’t answer the phone? Were they stupid enough to think he could sleep through that commotion? Hell. What a dumb-ass question. Of course, they were stupid...coming for him at Devin’s house.

Damn. He didn’t even know where Mick lived...how far he was from the condo. Maybe he should have called the cops, screw the consequences. In this upscale area, the cops probably would have been there before he hung up. Possibly quicker than Mick. *Fuck!* Letting family ties outweigh common sense just might get his ass killed.

Ewyn hopped off the bed and went to the dresser. He snatched one of Devin’s T-shirts from the drawer and slipped it on; the bottom edge brushed mid-thighs. He returned to the bed, flipped open his cell, and pressed #2.

“Hello...”

“Uncle Tim?”

“Ewyn...what’s wrong?”

“I’m alone. Called Mick...you know, Mick... No...maybe not.” *Babbling.* “Devin’s gone... Someone is trying to get into the condo.”

“Damn it!” Timothy snapped. “Hang tight, kid. On my way.”

The phone went dead at the same time the racket began outside the front door.

Author's Books We Love Page: <http://www.bookswelove.net/waltersspice.html>
 Author Janet Lane Walters' Website: <http://m-e-reid-puts-it-in-writing.com/>
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THE TEMPLE OF FYRE by Janet Lane Walters



Chapter One

Ria stuffed the scroll she'd taken from the shelves beneath her caftan and tightened the sash to make sure the cylinder holding the rolled papyrus remained hidden. Beads of perspiration covered her forehead. She rubbed the sleeve of her robe over her face. The night air held sultry remnants of the heat of the day. Usually, the thick walls of the temple complex kept the rooms and corridors cool. Tonight was different. The usual night breezes were absent so the heat remained. Perhaps the approaching solstice was the cause?

Or, maybe her fear of discovery caused her heart to thump against her chest and her muscles to tighten into confining bands? She was in a place where she had no right to be without the presence of one

of the priestesses. Acolytes were forbidden full access to the scrolls found in the scriptorium. She drew a deep breath. She'd acted out of necessity. The scroll beneath her caftan was one she'd discovered during another of her night searches. She wasn't permitted to read this one, but she had and the words had stirred questions her tutors had refused to address.

On the morrow, her ability to control the flames of the fyrestones would be tested. She would be ordered to call flames from a pair of scarlet crystals and blend her blaze with those raised by the priestesses of the circle. Then, the chief priestess would assign her a task. Ria believed the things she'd read in this particular scroll would help her during the ordeal. The test was not without risk. One slip and the flames she sought to control could turn her into a living torch.

She crept to the scriptorium door and peered into the hall. With senses alert, she listened and searched the shadows cast by the flickering torches on the white plaster of the walls. Sensing no one was near, she scurried along the corridor toward the living quarters of the priestesses and acolytes. With luck, she would reach her room without being discovered.

Her hand pressed against the scroll she wanted to read again. The words of this particular one were vastly different from the lessons she'd been taught by the

priestesses. Had they lied? Were the ways to use the fyrestones described in these writings true, or were they only a fable invented by some ancient scribe?

There were other scrolls that told tales that seemed unreal. The aged priestess in charge of the scriptorium had laughed when Ria had asked about dragons with eyes the color of the scarlet fyrestones. The old woman had scoffed when Ria had showed her passages describing wands wielded by wizards that sent lashes of bright or dark flames to control people.

There was no one she could ask if this scroll contained truths. Questions weren't encouraged. Still, she wanted to believe what she'd read in this scroll about the uses of the stones, for they told of helping the people and that appealed to her. Ria sighed. Since the day she'd been bought from the slavers by the chief priestess, her life, though interesting had been lonely. Not for her the crowded classrooms, or the dormitory where she could form friendships with the other acolytes. She had her own chamber and a private bathing room. During her lessons, she'd been the only student. Even her meals had been taken with the priestesses, not the other acolytes.

Why had she been kept isolated from the other acolytes? What make her so different? Like Ria, most of the others had been brought to Rosti by the slavers. At twenty, she was a year or two younger than most of the young women who had entered the temple with her.

She'd learned to call fire from every color of the crystals and learned how to blend the flames to form sheets of fire. She could impose maps and pictures on the sheets and knew the ways of sending spears of flame to various places. From the tiny flames of the white, to yellow, orange, and scarlet fyrestones, her progress had been steady.

A peal of laughter made her stiffen. She ducked into a shadowed alcove. After the evening meal, acolytes were to be in their rooms, not wandering in the halls. A pair of senior priestesses, their orange robes gleaming in the light from the hall torches, appeared. The women hurried past Ria's hiding place and entered the harras.

Ria trailed behind them. The noises from the studs' quarters stirred her curiosity. The men seldom left the harras, except for exercise in the garden, or when they were summoned to the room of one of the priestesses. Until Ria passed her final test, she wasn't allowed into the rooms where the men were kept. Several times, she had spied on the studs, but only during the day and never in the evening when the priestesses visited. She paused beside the beaded curtain and peered inside.

Her eyes widened. Most of the men were nude or scantily clad. Priestesses reclined on low couches. Studs offered beverages and finger foods. Ria watched as one of the men fondled a priestess' breasts. Another man swayed to the sound of a flute. He held his organ in his hand. Ria felt a stirring low in her belly. Her breath caught in her throat.

Malera's husky laughter rolled toward Ria. Before the chief priestess could discover her, Ria ducked into the hall leading to her chamber. When she reached the doorway, she carefully parted the beaded curtain and slipped into the room. If she'd been caught, Malera would have been furious. The chief priestess' temper outbursts often ended in an injury for the culprit.

Ria sank on the bed. The scene in the harras filled her thoughts and stirred her curiosity. What would have happened next? Though she'd been betrothed before her clan had sold her to the slavers, he had died and the women hadn't yet instructed her on the ways of a woman and a man.

A frown wrinkled her brow. The lessons of her teachers arose. Acolytes were forbidden to interact with men, except for official business. A priestess was permitted encounters, but she must never allow a man's organ to enter her body. Such a surrender would destroy her ability to control the flames she drew from the fyrestones.

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