

Northern Belle

By

Carolyn Faulkner

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Published by Blushing Books®,
a subsidiary of
ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901
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Faulkner, Carolyn
Northern Belle

eBook ISBN: 978-1-62750-1675

Cover Design by edhgraphics.blogspot.com

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Chapter I

Police Lt. Joseph Anderson had his cruiser pulled up next to a copse of trees on a street that was notoriously lazy and slow – more of a back road than a street. But lazy and slow pretty much described the whole town. His radar was on, but he didn't expect to be detecting much beyond the occasional dragonfly or mosquito. The lunch that Miss Hatty had fixed was spread out around him – the thermos full of ice cold milk was in the drink holder, the massive turkey club with lots of mayo and pickles on the dash, the bag of salt and vinegar chips on the passenger seat – they were one of his weaknesses – and a whoopee pie the size of his head on the console in between. He'd finally settled himself in for a well-deserved feast, after spending the morning chasing teenagers out of the Five and Dime on Main Street, fetching a nasty-assed, spitting, hissing, and clawing bundle of cat out of an oak tree for Mrs. Hardy – who didn't even bother with a thank you – and filling out the never-ending paperwork on the small drug bust he'd made last night.

All in all, he was mighty pleased with himself. It had been a job well done – most especially last night he thought with enormous satisfaction, as he took a huge bite out of the piled-high sandwich.

Some unfortunate motorist chose that exactly moment to roar by him, though, nearly startling the sandwich out of his hand, so that he ended up wearing the majority of it. The front of his usually impeccably kept uniform looked like a deli had exploded on it, and he was not a happy cop. Not only had his quiet lunch been completely disturbed and generally ruined, but some maniac was driving down a clearly posted twenty-five mile an hour two lane dirt road at – he glanced at the read out of the radar gun – fifty-seven miles an hour.

If he had had a better day, been in a better frame of mind, he might – just might – have let whoever it was go in favor of eating his sandwich in peace. But that idea had been ruined, and he was just angry enough to want to ruin someone else's day, too.

Joe quickly cleaned himself up as best he could and took off after the miscreant at a good clip, but still it took him a while to catch up. As soon as he saw the mostly-primer but apparently-once-blue disreputable old truck come into view, he grimaced, flipping on his lights and firing up the siren. The driver pulled over immediately, which Joe had to admit, was a point in his favor. He'd deduced that it was a guy because, in his experience, women didn't drive beat up old buckets like that, and besides, the driver had a painter's hat on backwards. That was a sure sign of a hotheaded teenaged boy – especially the backwards part.

No one had ever – or would ever – accuse Lieutenant Joseph Lincoln William Ryan Anderson of being cosmopolitan. He was as Southern as his four first names proclaimed, not that that meant in any way that he was stupid. He'd never had a hard time with any of his academics, even when he was playing high school sports all year-round. He'd grown up in the very small town in which he was now a well-respected member of the police force; Gray Oaks, Alabama had always been quite enough for him.

Oh, that wasn't to say he hadn't traveled. He had. He'd gone pretty much anywhere he could, especially when he was younger. He'd seen different parts of the country, but he had always been incredibly glad to come home at the end of the adventure, where everyone knew him and his ancestry back to the Neanderthals, and he knew pretty near everyone in Denton County. If they didn't know him, they knew his mom or his dad, or even his grandfather, who had been almost as big a football star in his high school years as Joe himself had been.

Football in the South was more than just a high school or college sport. It was a religion. Home games guaranteed a standing room only crowd every game, and even practices were well attended. And Joe was a star extraordinaire. He'd been playing since he was a kid, and unprecedentedly became a lineman when he was only a sophomore. He was the biggest kid on the team – his shoulders and arms were huge even at that age, and he generally dwarfed any of the tackles he came up against. Professional teams had begun scouting him as early as his sophomore year, and by the time he was a senior and in the starting lineup of the varsity squad, he could have pretty much had his pick of professional teams.

But that had never been what he wanted. He liked football, and played it well, but his real calling and interest was police work. His father had been a janitor, but Joe had grown up hearing all sorts of harrowing stories about being a policeman from his grandfather, and he had never considered being anything else. The day he'd turned eighteen, he'd gone down to the police department to apply for a job. After three months of training, during which he'd excelled in nearly every requirement – except perhaps what they called bedside manner – he was out on the street. Granted, it was a foot patrol beat in the small downtown, but it was a start.

Since then, he'd been the star on the force, although he'd never acted it. He'd never acted the football star, either. He had the most arrests, given out the most tickets, and taken no sick days whatever, since he'd always been disgustingly healthy. As a result, he had steadily climbed through the ranks and was now the Chief's right-hand man.

His grandfather was long gone, and his parents had died several years before, but not before they'd seen their son become a success . . . in every way but one.

He'd never married. Never really even come close. He'd dated and dated seriously on occasion, but Joe had never gotten to that point where he knew he wanted to spend the rest of his life with the woman who was sitting in front of him – or even lying beside him. He'd tried to imagine it with several of the women he'd dated, but he'd recognized that some sort of feeling was missing – love. He'd really liked the women he'd been with – and despite what his friends and coworkers might think, he hadn't slept with them all – but none of them had sparked any feelings of love in him. Lust, yes - most definitely. But not love.

He was pushing forty and had never really been in love. He discounted the one or two cases of puppy love he'd had when he was in high school. That was hardly love. He wanted what his parents and grandparents had had – full on, blow-the-top-of-your-head-off love. The kind you can't live without. The kind that seeps into your every pore and

makes you want to always be with that one person, till death parted you.

And for him, there would be no messy divorce. Perhaps that was it – he was just being cautious. He wanted to have a house, kids, the whole deal, including one more unusual thing – call it a preference. Joe didn't want the slightest chance of a divorce in the future. He wanted someone stable and smart and funny . . . and a body to die for wouldn't be a bad thing, although he tried not to be too shallow. But he did like a woman who was feminine, and that trait seemed to have been forgotten in today's world. He didn't want a woman who was going to try to bench press two-fifty right next to him. He wanted a woman who enjoyed being female with all the rights and privileges that came with that . . . and the expectations of behavior, as well.

Marriage and sexy women were the last things on his mind as he got out of the car and took off his shades, throwing them onto the mess on the passenger's seat, and donned his cowboy-style hat as he approached the other vehicle. Using good officer safety procedures, he didn't come right up to the car and lean over the window – that was just asking to get blown away, no matter how unlikely you thought it might be. This was not a truck that he recognized, and in a small town like this, that was something unusual. Heck, you could never tell what the locals were going to do, either, though, he thought with a rueful smile. He walked slowly, taking in every aspect of the truck – its maintenance and appearance – trying to get an overall sense of it and the situation before he had to confront the driver.

The back of the pickup was full of painting supplies – drop cloths, buckets of paint, brushes, etc. Whoever he was, he was either painting something big, or had stolen the truck of someone who was. Joe stopped just before the driver's side door, leaning his body well away from the window just in case this guy decided to do something funny, like poke a gun out the window or come out of the car punching. In this position, he'd have the advantage. Of course, at his size, he nearly always had the advantage, but size didn't work well against a gun.

His voice changed when he was working. It had always been deep and smooth – since it had changed when he was twelve or thirteen or so – but it had a note of command in it that was generally missing during a normal conversation . . . unless he had gone out for the occasional beer and was having to break up a fight at The Dump Bar, down by the swamp.

“Sir, you were going a might fast on this road. Speed limit's twenty-five,” he drawled, his body tense and ready, just in case. You could never tell with a traffic stop – they were one of the most potentially dangerous parts of an officer's job, after domestic dispute calls.

The only sign of movement from the car was one slim elbow – generously speckled with various colors of paint – that settled on top of the driver's door.

“I'm afraid I'm going to have to give you a ticket, Sir. I need to see your driver's license, registration, and insurance, please.” Joe eased forward a little, so that he could better see the driver's movements within the vehicle.

“Yes, Sir,” came the high-pitched reply.

Joe frowned. Could it be that this was a female after all? The license,

registration, and insurance were produced with no complaints at all. Joe had watched the driver lean forward, and had taken in every detail that he could about him or her, and had had to revise his assessment. She was female – but barely. There were splotches of paint on every part of her extremely disreputable overalls. He could see the grubby olive drab T-shirt she had on beneath it, which hadn't seemed to fare any better in avoiding the paint she was using. She had no discernible figure, was wearing no makeup whatsoever, and there was a huge splotch of paint on her left cheek, as well as one running into her right eyebrow, as if she had had paint on her hand and had wiped her brow. To cap off the entirely unappealing ensemble, as far as he could see she was wearing shit-kicker boots that ended halfway up her legs. She smelled of turpentine and paint . . . and, if he breathed deeply enough – not that he was wont to do that – of wet dog.

He took the information she'd given him and went back to the cruiser, running a check on it. She proved to have a clean record for as far back as he could check. The driver's license said that she was Shelly Fontaine. The last name seemed somewhat familiar, but he couldn't quite place it. He shrugged his shoulders and got out of the car to head back to Miss – more probably *Ms.* – Fontaine.

She reached for the cards he handed back to her with her left hand, and he noticed there was no ring on her third finger, not that he was particularly surprised at that fact. He also noticed that her fingernails were short and dirty. It was a wonder that there weren't splotched of paint on the license and registration. It seemed to be pretty much everywhere else on and around her.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to give you a ticket, uh, Ma'am," he repeated, flipping open the book where he'd already partially filled out the summons. "You can fight it if you like, but I have you dead to rights on the radar going fifty-seven in a twenty-five. By all rights I should be taking you to jail – more than twenty-five over the limit is an arrest-able offense."

"I appreciate your lenience, officer."

Was that sarcasm he detected in that northern tone of hers? It was hard for him to tell – all Northerners sounded faintly sarcastic to him. They were always in a hurry, even in their speech.

"Sign here, please, ma'am," he handed her the pad and his pen, which she signed with a flourish and handed both back to him. Joe gave her the copy of the ticket that was hers, saying in a warning tone, "You take it easy on your speed from now on, you hear?"

Her smile was, perhaps, her saving grace, revealing even white teeth. It was warm and more than pleasant, and invited those around her to join with her in the joke. "Yes, sir," came her answer, in a tone he recognized as perfunctory, and distinctly laced with sarcasm.

Despite his stomach rumbling rather insistently, he decided to follow her for a while, just to annoy her and get some of his own back. He didn't usually do that, knowing it just made the motorist more nervous and likely to make another error, but at this point, he was reconsidering whether he should have hauled her in.

Unfortunately for him, fortunately for her, she drove responsibly for the next few miles towards town, and, just before the turnoff to go into Gray Oaks, his stomach finally

got the better of him and he pulled into Sally's Luncheonette. He was low on fuel and that made him grumpy. He didn't usually let a traffic stop get to him so much – but her look, her attitude . . . just annoyed the pee out of him. Joe slammed himself down into one of the stools at the snack bar. Noreen, the lunch waitress who had had her eye – and more than that when she thought she could get away with it – on him for years now, flittered over with a big glass of milk.

“Hey, handsome! What can I getcha?”

Joe smiled weakly and eyed the blackboard-full of homemade specials. “I'll have the meatloaf, please, Noreen.” He took a deep swallow of the milk and let it slide down to his burning gullet. He'd have preferred a Coke at the very least, or a beer if he were off-duty, but he'd been having acid stomach a lot lately and had taken to drinking milk, a habit that occasionally got him into a fight when he ordered it at the Dump. But Noreen had picked up on that preference immediately and had begun automatically serving him a big glass of milk in place of his usual Coke or iced tea.

“Sure thing, Joe. Do you want the mashed or fries with that?”

Sally's mashed potatoes were real, lumps and all, with just a touch of garlic and butter and salt and pepper . . . his mouth was watering just thinking about it. “Mashed, please.”

“The veggie of the day is green beans?” She made the statement a question.

Joe nodded, saying, “Thanks, Noreen.”

The pretty young woman flushed and nodded, backing towards the kitchen, to keep her eyes on him as long as possible. She nearly got run over by Sally herself, who was coming out with a tray full of coconut cream pie for the big dessert display case.

Joe nodded at Sally, who looked like she had her hands more than full, and minutes later he was tucking into a steaming hot plate of home-cooked goodness, and his sour stomach and bad mood seemed to dissolve away like just so much gravy melting in his mouth.

Across town at the Gray Oaks Town Square, Shelly Fontaine was doing errands – getting some stamps, a few groceries, and, of course, buying more paint. When she'd decided to move back to Gray Oaks and buy the old homestead where she'd grown up, she hadn't realized just how much it was going to take to refurbish it. Painting the old thing was just about killing her – and it seemed to gobble paint the way she gobbled peanut M & M's, when given the chance – endlessly.

She lingered in the paint store, though, looking at various wallpapers that caught her eye. She wanted to do a border in the living room, and perhaps in the kitchen and dining room – roses, of course. Her bedroom was already full: a new shabby-chic pink-and-cream rose comforter, pillowcases, and curtains of the same matching patterns. That was one consistency about her – not that there were a lot of those: when she found something she liked, like a china pattern or a fabric pattern, she had to have everything

that came in that pattern, from dinner plates to napkin rings to door stops. Everything. It always made buying presents for her very easy.

Finally, Shelly decided she had to get back to the grind. The house called to her, complaining loudly about its dilapidated condition. She knew that her house-proud parents had to be rolling in their urns at the house's condition – they had taken such loving care of it while she was growing up. She wanted to fix it up almost more for them than for her.

And she had needed a break, she admitted to herself. It had taken a while for her to get to that point, but one failed marriage – one *disastrously* failed marriage – combined with her unexpected success as a writer and the inherent demands therein had driven her to the brink. Of what, she wasn't sure, but something that wasn't good, she knew that much.

So she'd finished her last book and mailed it lovingly off to her publisher – likening it in her mind as she always did to a mother sending her child off to his first day of kindergarten – then she'd moved, lock, stock, and barrel down to her old childhood home, which had only recently come on the market. She'd snatched it up at a bargain price, fully prepared to spend whatever was needed to restore it. It wasn't a glorious southern mansion like the ones in New Orleans, but it was a big old one-family home, the kind that at one time had housed a passel of kids who worked the nearby land with their parents. She'd been delighted to see that it hadn't been chopped up into apartments, which seemed to be the horrid trend of late.

Shelly hadn't even left a forwarding address or number where she could be found, but she decided that for a short time, she didn't *want* to be found – except by a very select few like her brother Evan, who had thought she was crazy to become a writer in the first place, and was even crazier to go back to Gray Oaks. She wanted to take some time to herself and not worry about whether her husband Russ really was working late, or if he was humping his pretty secretary in the hotel down the street. She didn't want to worry about how many pages she got written or edited that day, or whether her editor, who really was a love, was going to call and demand . . . well, suggest, rewrites for the chapters she'd thought had come out the best.

She hadn't been a belle in years – had never really been one at all in her life, but the idea of relaxing and stepping back, taking a moment to smell the magnolias, appealed to her like nothing else at the moment, and she couldn't think of a better place to do it than Gray Oaks. She had a history here – a good one – until they left when she was about fifteen. Both of her parents had been born and raised here, and she'd always considered it home.

The paint and several wallpaper sample books found their way into the junky back of the truck. Shelly knew it – and she – looked a mess, and that fact had obviously stuck in that fuddy-duddy policeman's craw . . . no matter how hunky he probably looked if a smile ever broke the unforgiving lines of that craggy, masculine face. But she had too much to do to worry about how spotless – or rather, *spotted* her vehicle was. And she'd never been the type to fuss much with her looks. Oh, she could if she wanted to; there were a few people – like her now-ex – who had even referred to her as a knockout. But

that wasn't who she was or how she lived her life.

She caught a glimpse of herself in the rearview mirror and had to laugh. She looked even worse than usual. Ah, well. There was a job to do, and, although she wasn't hurting any, she wasn't going to waste money paying someone to do what she could do just as well – or close enough for government work, anyway – herself. She wasn't going to throw away money, and for the first time in a long time – probably since she was a kid – the only person she had to please about this project was herself.