
RUNNING HOT

Dear Editor - Book Four

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This book contains fantasy themes appropriate for mature readers only.
Nothing in this book should be interpreted as Blushing Books' or the author's
advocating any non-consensual sexual activity.

Dedicated to the fine writers of Use Your Words writing group, at the Inner Truth Project in Port St. Lucie, Florida.

To fiercely brave women everywhere.

With deep gratitude for Anna Kristell and the entire team of talented, affirming folks at Blushing Books.

Author's Note

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, events, and incidents are the products of the author's imagination. A few locations in *Running Hot* are real; others are made up. Resemblance to actual persons or events is purely coincidental, but the author sincerely hopes that all of us find the kind of love and happiness that is possible. *It's never too late!*

Summer Adventure

Despite her pregnancy, Jessica Vincent had enjoyed the road trip until today. She and her best friend, former maid of honor, and talented co-worker Donna Brown were driving to Florida with a dual purpose. They were taking Jessica's niece to Disney World but also meeting up with Donna's husband Eric, who was in Florida doing a custom stonework job. So far, the drive had been relatively trouble-free. Little Angela was precocious, but as long as she had snacks, videos to watch on her tablet, and regular potty breaks, she was an easy traveler.

For their part, Jessica and Donna always loved having time to talk about their marriages, about Jessica's pregnancy, and about their jobs at *Our City* magazine. The latest news on that front was exciting. A trial run for the national market was in the works. Jessica's husband Worth, the magazine's editor, had asked them to be on the lookout for unique, slice-of-life material as they traveled through several states.

The women chatted, sang along with the radio and kept Angela entertained as the SUV ate up the miles of highway. Six lanes had turned into four, then two. Today, they twisted

and turned along the mountain road leading to Poplar Gap, a small mountain community in North Carolina.

They wondered who might get the assignments for the national debut. Although two of the magazine's top writers, neither wanted to go on the road for work. "Do you think we'll ever get to the point where we've been married for so long, time apart isn't a bad thing? I hear people talking about *wanting* more space from their spouses," Donna asked. "I can't relate."

Jessica agreed. "I miss Worth so much, it hurts. Don't get me wrong—I'm having fun, but I know my attitude is less than stellar."

More to the point, Jessica's *car's* attitude was less than stellar. At their last stop, the engine hadn't sounded right when she turned the key. The good news was that the SUV Worth had given her for Christmas was now fairly near where she planned to stop for a few hours. The plan was to visit friends in Poplar Gap for a few hours on their way to Disney World. Depending on how things were going, they might be spending the night in Georgia or north Florida.

Their friend Kristina Edwards and her beloved Ian Cameron were planning a summer wedding. From all accounts, the couple was doing well, living together on Cameron Mountain outside of Poplar Gap. Kristina's sister Layla was Jessica's sister-in-law. Layla gave Jessica strict orders to take photos of the cabin where they lived and do a bit of reconnaissance. Was Ian *really* as wonderful as Kristina seemed to think he was? Thus far, they only had the *Reader's Digest* version. Half-Cherokee, his grandfather Will Cameron had raised him. He was, according to Kristina, devastatingly handsome. They fell in love during a record-breaking, early snow just months earlier.

Layla wanted more information before she gave her blessing.

Possibly for the twentieth time in the last ten minutes, little

Angela announced from her car seat in the back that she was hungry and needed to pee. Layla's daughter had never been to Disney and was probably too young to appreciate it, but it had taken all of two seconds for Layla and her husband Keith to accept Jessica's offer. Parenthood was an energy sapper, not to mention libido. The trip would coincide with Keith's spring break from school, so they planned a stay-cation/second honeymoon. (After Jessica's call, Keith had reportedly exclaimed, "Do you think we still know how?")

Jessica caught Angela's eye in the rearview mirror. Not yet two years old, she was precocious. "Hold on, pumpkin. Aunt Donna will find you a snack, but there's no bathroom in sight, I'm afraid."

Donna rummaged in the compact cooler at her feet. She held up an apple for Jessica's approval, then handed it back to Angela. Jessica was grateful for Donna's company. Her due date wasn't until June, but her pregnant bladder required frequent pit stops, and keeping up with Angela would certainly have been more difficult without Donna along.

"How far are we from Poplar Gap?" Donna asked. They would visit Kristina and Ian for a few hours before heading south. Disney wasn't Donna's main motivation, however. Eric had been in Orlando for two months. Two *long* months. During his first trip without her, just days after their wedding, Donna had spiced things up with sexy costumes and FaceTime calls. She'd been doing the same this go 'round, but it was a poor substitute for actual skin time.

Donna continued with a sigh. "I want to check out Ian, too, but I can hardly wait to see Eric again."

Jessica laughed softly as the SUV maneuvered the winding mountain road. "I'm sure he feels the same way."

At one time, Eric had been *Jessica's* boyfriend. They had never been on the same page when it came to their emotions. Or communication. Or sexuality. Unbidden, a visual of Donna

tied up in one of the couple's "red room" contraptions leapt to Jessica's mind. She shook herself to shift focus. *To each his own!* She smiled, remembering when she'd asked Worth if he had inclinations in that direction, willing to branch out depending on his response. He had assured her that their particular brand of lovemaking was exactly to his liking. *And to mine.* Just the thought of him inside of her caused her to shift in her seat. *Focus, woman.*

Jessica checked the GPS image on the phone mounted on the dashboard. "Cameron Mountain isn't far as the crow flies, but on these twisting roads, it looks like we're almost an hour away." Despite wishing to stay cheerful, the words caught in her throat. *Why in the world am I doing this? We could've flown. I miss Worth.*

"Aunt Jess. Peeeeeeee. Hurry."

Jessica sighed. They would just have to wing it. It's not like anyone would see them if they stepped into the woods; there had been no traffic on the road for miles. Jessica slowed the car to a stop on the narrow shoulder and cut the engine off. "My turn for potty police," she murmured. When she got the child out of her car seat, she led her across the road behind a tree. Diapers would be easier, she thought, but leave it to Angela to do everything sooner than usual.

Angela balked a little at the thought of peeing in the woods, but necessity did indeed prove to be the mother of invention. She followed her aunt's instructions about foot placement and squatting, and soon grinned with relief. "Pee too? You pee too, Aunt Jess?"

She needed to—she *always* needed to these days—but feeling less adventurous than her niece, she opted to wait for civilization if at all possible. "I'm good," Jessica said in lilting tones. "We'll be at Aunt Kris's soon. Are you excited? *I am.* I'm excited about seeing her cabin. Excited about seeing her

boyfriend. Excited about seeing Mickey Mouse." *Excited about never taking another road trip again in my life.*

Back at the car, Donna had taken the driver's seat to give Jessica a break. With Angela buckled in safely, the two women sighed in unison, anticipating a pleasant visit in their near future with clean bathrooms and adult conversation. Maybe even, in Donna's case, an adult beverage.

Donna turned the key. The engine clicked a few times but did not turn over. Jessica frowned. "Try it again."

Click-click-click. Silence. Frantically, Jessica opened the glove compartment and pulled out the paperwork stored there. The SUV was practically new. *This shouldn't be happening!* "I have no idea," Jessica said quietly. A sign ahead indicated they were approaching the town of Humphrey, population 2000. "Maybe there's a car repair shop, but how will we *get* there?" She seriously doubted there was a local branch of Triple-A. If she called her insurance company, Lord only knew how long it would take for someone to find them. *Getting away from it all is seriously overrated.*

In the side mirror, Donna saw a truck approaching and alerted Jessica.

"I hope it's someone friendly," Jessica said, turning to look. A city girl, she felt completely out of her element on a winding rural road. Trouble with a stranger was exactly what they *didn't* need.

A black man about the age of her stepfather parked behind the SUV and got out of the truck, accompanied by a beautiful but fierce looking dog. *His truck looks pretty new, anyway.* Jessica decided to meet the challenge head on. She murmured, "Maybe this fellow can help," adding, "but lock the doors just in case."

"Howdy." The man stepped closer with a warm grin but politely kept a discreet distance. The dog stuck to his side like glue, evidently well-trained. "What seems to be the problem?"

Jessica threw up her hands in exasperation. "I have no idea! The engine was slow to start earlier today, and now it won't start at all. We've been on the road several days, with a toddler." She pointed to the back seat, where Angela happily munched her apple. *Might as well lay the "damsels in distress" on thick.* She pointed to her stomach. "And I'm pregnant."

"So I see! Congratulations. So where're you headed?" The man walked around the car slowly, looking for obvious issues, stopping to wave cheerfully and smile at Donna and the child. Now and then, he'd reach down and scratch the dog's short gray coat as if to reassure him that all was well.

Maybe it wasn't the wisest thing to do, laying all her proverbial cards on the table with a stranger, but as a journalist, Jessica also trusted her instincts. She'd bet money this man was one of the good guys. "Eventually, we're aiming for Disney World, but today, we're expected in Poplar Gap."

The man grinned even wider. "Do tell! That's my stomping ground."

"Do you know Kristina Edwards and Ian Cameron?"

The man laughed and held out his hand. "I sure do! Name's Chip Murphy, ma'am. Ian's my nephew, as a matter of fact. Tina was my neighbor before she moved in with him."

Jessica was so relieved, she trotted closer and threw her arms around Chip. "Chip, of course! I'm Kristina's sister's sister-in-law. Shirttail relative, but I've heard a slew of stories about you!"

Chip held Jessica at arm's length and rolled his eyes, chuckling. "I'll just bet you have." The previous October, Chip had helped Ian's grandfather with his cockamamie plan to find a suitable woman for Ian. Kristina had virtually been kidnapped. When an unseasonably heavy snow trapped her in the cabin with Ian alone—and trapped the others down the mountain—Kristina and Ian had promptly fallen in love. It had been quite the winter, filled with new and renewed relationships.

"So you're Will and Eleanor's long-lost son. We've heard so much about you and your parents, too. How are they? I'd love to meet them." She whipped her head around and shot Donna a *you're-not-going-to-believe-this* look. Will and Eleanor, a local black girl, had been in love as teenagers, but her parents had whisked her away before Will even knew she was pregnant with his child. Worth had been instrumental in researching Chip's adoption papers, as well as helping Kristina resolve something from her past. *This may be just the kind of story Worth is looking for.*

Chip became serious. "I'm forever grateful to your husband, ma'am. *Darn* it. My folks are away for a week or so, visiting friends in Asheville. I drove them over just this morning." He rubbed his chin in thought. "It's probably the battery. I can give you a jump-start, or I can tow you to Pete Cummings' shop, then drive you to the cabin. Depending on what's wrong with the car, you might have a bit of a stay, but I'll bet the young'un will love it."

"It's not the battery," Jessica said. "I don't know much about cars, but I know that much. This is a new car. Can't be the battery." She sighed. "We need to know that it's fixed before we head south. Tow, please!"

Jessica stood and watched as Chip expertly pulled his truck in front of her SUV. When he let the tailgate down to pull off the heavy tow chain stored there, his dog jumped into the bed of the truck. Chip slammed the tailgate back in place. "Blue wants to be my look-out, apparently. We'll take it nice and slow, Blue," Chip said, then he turned to Jessica. "Just keep the wheel steady."

"Is Mr. Cummings, um, reasonable?" Jessica asked.

Chip laughed. "Doesn't really matter, does it? Come to think of it, I heard he's been under the weather, but don't worry. Andy'll take good care of you. Now put 'er in neutral and make sure the brake's off. Get set for a little yank when we get started. I'll go slow."

Soon the two vehicles were back on the road. Jessica didn't take her eyes off Chip's bumper while Donna tried not to notice the occasional sharp drop-offs. She chattered breezily to Angela, pointing out wildflowers and trees to keep both their minds occupied. Even going at a snail's pace, it wasn't long before Chip pulled into a service station on the edge of town bearing a bright sign that announced, "Pete's Place."

"Mountain?" Angela chirped.

Jessica giggled. "One of them, sweetheart. Not Aunt Kristina's yet, but we'll be there soon. Hopefully." She stretched from the pent-up tension on the road and opened first, her door, then Angela's, as Donna got out and breathed in the mountain air.

Jessica frowned at Blue. "Is he, um, staying back there?"

In answer, Chip lowered the tailgate. The dog took off like a shot into the woods behind the service station. "Blue wouldn't hurt a soul unless I told him to," he said, "but he'd just as soon play while we're here."

Satisfied that it was a safe environment for a child, Jessica unbuckled the straps on Angela's car seat. "Up you go, baby!" she said brightly.

Angela frowned as her tiny feet hit the ground. "Not baby. *Yôu* baby," she said authoritatively, patting Jessica's stomach. Angela looked around and suddenly squealed with delight. "Unca Worth!" she cried, running in the direction of the garage.

Jessica's eyes followed Angela. Of course, it wasn't Worth. Worth was at home, working in his office at the magazine. In the semi-darkness of the garage's interior, she could definitely see why Angela had been confused, however. A figure in overalls, shorter than Worth but not by much, faced away from them. Under a baseball cap, a bald head was visible that looked, for all the world, like Worth's. Even though her brain told her it was impossible that he'd be working on cars in North

Carolina, the familiar sight of a bald head made Jessica's heart leap.

Chip saw her staring inside the garage. "There's Andy right there," he said as he unhooked the chain and threw it back into the bed of his truck.

Angela pulled on the leg of the overalls. When Andy turned around, Jessica's jaw dropped. Andy's face was unmistakably female.

The twenty-something young woman took off her baseball cap to wipe perspiration away with a fairly clean cloth from her bib pocket and adopted a stern expression. "Does this little girl belong to anyone, or do I have to keep her?"

Angela giggled. "Funny head. Can't keep me. I with them." She pointed at Jessica. "Aunt Jess, Aunt Donna. Taking to Mickey Mouse. That brown man helped. Big dog."

Before Jessica could die of embarrassment, Chip nodded. "You know your colors, little lady. I am indeed brown." He bent over to compare his strong arm with Angela's tiny pale one. "Mine's a lot browner than yours, but if you're headed to Florida, that could change."

Angela giggled again. Used to being the center of attention at home, she loved every second of it now. Suddenly, she frowned at Andy. "Why no hair?"

Before Andy could answer, a young man about her age pulled into the station on a five-speed bicycle. His long dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail under the bike helmet, which he removed and hung by its strap on the handlebars. He waved but said nothing.

"Hey, Jeffrey. Jeffrey Wilson, meet..." Andy's voice drifted off. "...a smart little girl and her friends. They just got here, thanks to Mr. Murphy." She addressed Jessica and Donna. "Chip brings stranded drivers here fairly regularly."

"You can pay me with a cold drink," Chip teased, "before they hear about the really *good* shop down the road."

Jessica held out a hand to Andy. "Jessica Vincent. And this is Donna Brown. The small talkative person is my niece. Chip says you work wonders."

While Jeffrey watched and listened, Andy asked detailed questions about any sounds or smells Jessica had noticed and the car's service record. "It's probably the battery," Andy said.

"It's not the battery!" Jessica insisted. "I'm sure of that much, anyway. The car's brand new, almost. But we've got so far to go, I want to make sure it's safe before we head out. How will we get it into the garage?"

Jeffrey had stood a little stiffly off to one side, but now he stepped closer. "I'll help," he said. "Someone should get in the car and steer while I push with you and Chip." When Jessica turned and he saw her pregnant profile, his eyebrows shot up.

Jessica laughed. "How about *I* get in the car and steer while the rest of *you* push?"

Soon the SUV was high above their heads on the hydraulic lift. Andy frowned as she walked underneath the chassis. "I'll check everything out, of course, but my money's still on the battery. Don't worry, though. Whatever's fucked up, I'll fix it."

Surprised by both the bald head and bad language, Donna asked casually, "How long are we talking about?" Every delay put her that much further from reuniting with Eric.

Andy did some mental calculations, making little grimaces as she did so. "As late as it's getting, you should plan on tomorrow."

Jessica caught the disappointment in Donna's eyes and shrugged. "We're driving to Florida. Since we'll be in Orlando several days, maybe a patch job now, as long as it's safe? Then I could get it repaired properly there?"

Andy nodded. "I'll make some calls, see if I can't recommend someone there." She looked away to mutter, "It's the battery."

When Chip whistled, Blue bounded through the trees and

jumped up onto the bed of the truck. "Let's get you up to Cameron Mountain," he said, slamming the tailgate closed. "Can you bring the car down again, Andy? We'll need that car seat and their bags. It's gonna be a little tight but at least I've got the double cab now. If I still had my old truck, we'd have to stick the little one in back."

Angela jumped up and down. "Ride in back with Blue! Pleaaaaaaase?"

Jeffrey was horrified. "Oh, *no*, Mr. Murphy! That would be against the law. It wouldn't be safe. I'm surprised you would even—"

Chip slapped the young man playfully on the shoulder. "I'm kidding! Principal Clark would have my hide if I put young'uns in the back. You know that! Jeffrey here's a senior at Humphrey K-12, where my lady friend is the principal. Kristina works there, too."

"Miss Edwards is my teacher," Jeffrey smiled proudly. "She's the best."

Well, that explains a lot, thought Jessica. There was something about Jeffrey she hadn't been able to put her finger on, but now she understood. Kristina worked with autistic students in the school's Exceptional Education and Student Services department. Jeffrey must be one of her high functioning students. Jessica smiled warmly at the young man. "A senior! Congratulations! What are your plans after that, do you know?"

Andy leaned her shoulder in against Jeffrey's. From a distance, Jessica thought they would look like buddies, maybe brothers.

"Jeffrey and I went to school together *forever*," Andy said. "When he graduates, he wants to stick around and help with ESE, don't you, Jeffrey? He's great with younger kids."

"Are you going to be a senior too, then?" Donna asked in a tone that Jessica recognized as the journalist in her digging for

details. Andy looked older than high school, but then, so did Jeffrey. Maybe it was her extreme hairstyle.

Andy lowered her voice while Jeffrey took Angela by the hand through the shop's little waiting room into the adjoining store for a snack. "I'm twenty-two. I graduated five years ago. Jeffrey's twenty, but he's been a senior a while. His mother wasn't sure he was ready to leave school yet. Jeffrey says that's pretty common with parents of autistic kids." She smiled suddenly. "Jeffrey's a fucking genius, though, in his own way."

Her smile, even on a dirty face, was dazzling, transforming her from boyish to beautiful. Donna and Jessica were dying to ask about her baldness. Her enormous hazel eyes and eyebrows suggested that her hair, if she'd had any, would be dark brown.

Andy caught them staring and sobered quickly. "Jeffrey's mother just went through her final round of chemo," she explained. "Fucking cancer. Jeffrey didn't want her to feel alone when her hair started falling out, but he has this, um, *thing* about his own hair. He can't stand to have anybody touch it." She gave a little shrug and looked past them into the bright sunlight. "I said I'd do it instead." She rubbed her head. "It'll grow back."

Angela ran up, clutching a bag of chips. "You gotta see, Aunt Jess. Pretty!" Grabbing Jessica by the hand, she pulled her with all the strength in her little arms, with Donna following. Inside the small waiting area, was an exquisite mural portraying, they assumed, the history of the town. The faces were portrayed in such detail, they looked ready to speak at any moment.

Jeffrey beamed at their oohs and ahhs. "I took photographs and printed them on cards, if you'd like to see them."

Jessica smiled. "What a smart thing to do! This art work is far too good to just stay on a wall."

Jeffrey led her to the rack inside the store where colorful cards and matted prints were neatly wrapped in clear plastic.

Jessica took one of each from the rack and turned them over. "Who's the artist? I don't see a name anywhere."

Jeffrey nodded his head toward the garage. "Andy. Andy is the artist."

Jessica's eyes narrowed in thought as she flipped through the artwork. *An artist who doesn't sign her art, who works in a car shop, and who shaved her head in solidarity with a cancer patient, who may have one of the prettiest smiles I've seen, and who cusses like a longshoreman. If that's not a human interest story people would love, I don't know what is.*