

Adored: The Not Valentine's Valentine's Day

By Carolyn Faulkner

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Faulkner

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## Prologue

“If you’re not careful, you’re going to get a spanking along *with* your engagement ring,” came the soft, husky warning.

She’d seen that look before, heard that scolding tone of voice all too often, and knew it well enough that she absolutely could not suppress the urge to squirm in her chair, a movement which she knew his hawk eyes wouldn’t miss.

Sean was down on one knee before her with a velvet ring box in his hand. Tess could hear the distinct lack of the usual conversation that buzzed around them and knew that all eyes in the restaurant were on them.

Damn he was handsome! She thought. Too damned handsome for her, really. What *did* the man see in her, anyway?

Sean could see her busy little mind whirring away but succeeded in distracting her by opening the box to reveal the big marquis diamond with two good sized baguettes along either side. Her frosted pink fingertips had flown immediately to her matching pink frosted lips, those shockingly violet blue eyes gone round with surprise.

“Be mine.” Not at all a question, but much more of a pseudo-Valentine command, since this was actually the day after Valentine’s.

With total disregard for the expensive dress she was wearing, Tess joined him on the carpet to throw her arms around him and whisper, “Yes, please,” into his ear and feel those muscled arms pull her even further against him.

Was that a sigh of relief she’d heard? Had he been worried about her response? She wondered. Nah. Sean was the most self-confident man she’d ever known. Tess couldn’t imagine that he would assume she would say anything other than exactly what he wanted her to.

She couldn’t imagine what the consequences would be if she hadn’t, she thought, her butt was still tingling from the spanking she’d gotten just before they’d left on this little getaway of theirs.

The rest of the patrons had erupted in cheers when it was obvious that she had said yes, and they were gifted by the owners of the restaurant with a second bottle of champagne, with which to toast their long and happy life together.

Sean – ever the gentleman – helped her back into her chair, his hungry eyes never leaving her face as he then poured them both a glass, saying, as he raised his own, “To the woman I love.”

To which she replied without hesitation, “To the man I love,” clinking her glass with his then taking a healthy swallow of the bubbly, thinking all the while that it certainly hadn’t started out that way . . .

## Chapter One

Tessa Renee Martin had moved back to Thompson Bend, New Hampshire four or so years ago because it was one of the few places she could remember being happy as an Air Force brat. And when the relationship she had been sure was going to be her happily ever after ended up, instead, with her drowning the pain of his betrayal in so much whiskey and – her true Achilles heel – gold vanilla cupcakes with four inches of frosting on top that she could barely pull herself back into the real world, she knew she had to leave the comfortable life she'd found for herself in Florida.

The place she landed was pretty much the same as what she had remembered, with very few additions. There was the ubiquitous Wal-Mart on the outskirts of town, and – as was requisite in every New England town, it seemed – a Rite Aid or a Walgreen's on every damned corner, proving that loads of old Yankee folk couldn't afford to or didn't want to snowbird every winter.

She'd felt immediately as if she'd come home, and with a renewed sense of purpose she determined to follow her dream and open a flower shop. She'd been an assistant manager of a very large one in Florida, but noticed that the distinctly, deliberately quaint downtown area of this tiny burg was lacking that service, and she thought that a florist might do well here.

Like almost all other small towns in the area, Thompson Bend had experienced a wave of gentrification that had had expensive housing developments springing up out of what had previously been cow pastures. It was just close enough to Portsmouth to make its more civilized accoutrement readily available if one was willing to drive a bit, but not close enough, she thought, that her potential clientele would decide to go there for their floral needs instead.

Three years later, bearing the full first name that she'd always eschewed because it sounded so damned pompous to her own ears, Contessa's Flowers was, she had to admit, a modest success. While she hadn't been greeted with open arms – no small New England town was going to do that, she already knew – she had become a fixture in the small town by opening earlier and staying open later than one might have expected of a one woman shop, by making sure she went that extra mile for her customers, whether that meant hand delivering funeral sprays well before or after hours or, as she was seriously considering, doing a cross promotion event with the candy shop across the street. Tessa did her best to remember every customer by name, and their spouses' and kids' names, too, as well as the dates of their anniversaries, birthdays, et cetera, and she quickly built up a good sized base of repeat customers because of it. She also became involved in the town's celebrations, often donating her own time and the resultant floral displays, which also garnered her great word of mouth advertising.

But even three years after settling here, Tessa was still adjusting to some of the more annoying aspects of living in a small town, and this morning was no different.

She was renting a small house out in the boonies that she truly loved because – although it wasn't the dream house on the beach she intended to own one day in the not too distant future – it did have a nice view of a tributary river where she could walk and collect shells and sea glass when she was of a mood to. It wasn't the prettiest of views, but it and the house itself suited her just fine.

Except for the ride to and from the shop. That was going to drive her batshit crazy some time soon, and she was going to end up picking off fellow drivers with a shotgun one morning, she knew it for a fact. If it wasn't the tourists dawdling their way into town during a large portion of the spring, all of summer, and most of the fall, it was the natives in the winter, who somehow had all, collectively, decided that even though the posted speed limit was fifty, that they all needed to drive at least five miles – or more - *below* said limit.

And that was exactly the situation she found herself in – yet again - this morning. She was going to be late to open the store if this damned hillbilly in the ginormous blue truck didn't wake up and find the accelerator with both friggin' feet.

There was one – count it one – two lane road into Portsmouth that didn't take you out and around and through East Bumfuck. She'd spent months trying to find a more efficient route to work and never came up with one. Route four was the most direct way, and, since this was late fall, early winter, it was rife with natives, slow poking their way into Thompson Bend.

And the idiot that was in front of her was the worst. Not only was he going so slow Tess was surprised they weren't rolling backwards, but his truck was so damned wide she couldn't easily see around it to see who – if anyone – was coming in the other lane. They did this exact dance almost every morning; he seemed to have the same schedule as she did, dammit, and, of course, the powers that be hadn't seen fit to allow for passing a car on much of any of the stretch of road she used at least twice a day. There were two places on the twenty minute one way trip where the double yellow line became a dotted line on her side, and they'd passed both of those places, of course.

Well, no guts, no glory, as far as she was concerned. She wasn't going to dawdle along behind this idiot any longer than she had to. So, after peeping out around him as best she could and determining that there wasn't anyone barreling at her from the other lane, she downshifted into fourth and floored it, making the engine of her geriatric little Miata strain loudly with the effort.

Being in a hurry and having no patience at all, Tess hadn't judged things as well as she might have, and there was another car coming towards her as she moved into the oncoming lane. She barely made it past the huge truck and back to safety before the other car whooshed by, but as far as she was concerned, he was the one at fault; *he* was the one who had caused her to take her life in her hands to pass him, and she let him know it by giving him the old one fingered salute in her rear view mirror as she sped well

ahead of him, barely making it to the shop in time to open as she continued to fume about the selfishness of other drivers.

When her part time employee – and good friend – Pam came in at ten, Tess decided to treat herself to a coffee. Pam had arrived with one in hand, or she would have bought her one, too. She didn't usually drink it as it didn't like her much, but she had a definite taste for one and there was a shop just down the street – one of the few in the area that was *not* a Dunkin Donuts – that she occasionally patronized when the mood struck. The Udder Place was a small shop, very traditional New Englandish in that it was the anti-Starbucks. They didn't do foam or pumps or ventis. They had three or four different flavors of good, real coffee – none of that fancy stuff, and, although Tess was accustomed to getting exactly what she wanted, she figured she was probably the most demanding customer they had.

There was a line nearly out the door when she arrived – assailed as she was the moment she'd opened the door by the smell of strong coffee offset by the enticing aromas of various home baked goods - it moved quickly, and before she knew it, she was up.

The owner of the shop was working the counter herself, as usual, and recognized her on site. “Hi, Tess! How goes the flower business?”

“It's going pretty well, if I do say so myself,” she smiled back at Helen. “Well enough that I thought I deserved a bit of a reward, so here I am.”

“Well, what can I get you?”

“I think I'll succumb to temptation and get a large decaf, three splashes of skim and three Equals, please, with just a slight shake of cinnamon.”

Helen, the owner, had strategically located a huge display of luscious pastries right in front of her customers so they would have to look at them while their drink was made. When she handed Tess her coffee and saw the glazed look in her eye, she laughingly asked, “Anything else?”

Tess whimpered audibly, still staring at all the homemade delights and trying to decide just how good she wanted to be. Finally she groaned, saying, “You are cruel and unusual waving all of these goodies under my nose. I'm starving, and I'll have an apple cider doughnut, warmed, with cream cheese frosting, please.”

Helen deliberately left the frosting off of some of her wares, only to slather a generous dollop of whatever flavor of it they chose onto the top of whatever her customers had ordered, if they so desired. With the doughnut warmed just slightly, all of that frosting would melt onto and into and over it, and Tess could barely wait to sink her teeth into it.

As she took her coffee and the small box that contained her sin, Tess warned with a smile, “I'm going to blame my first heart attack on you, you know.”



“It’s been done already,” Helen deadpanned back, already moving on to the next person in line who happened to be one Sean Maddox, the man she knew was responsible for the puddles of drool that were already forming on her good tiled floor. She knew – because the line was ninety percent female – that it really wasn’t her pastries that had them all salivating.

But Sean wasn’t paying her any mind at all. His eyes were on Miss Martin, who had taken only a few steps away from the counter before she already had the donut out of its entirely unnecessary case and was sinking her teeth into it with a moan of pure pleasure that had him amazed to find parts of him standing at attention, forcing him to use his morning paper to try to maintain some level of decorum in a public place.

Sean knew he should stop staring at her – especially considering his overreaction - but he just couldn’t seem to drag his eyes away. She was enjoying her treat with such unabashed delight that all he could do was wonder if she’d be quite as vocal – or enthusiastic - when he had her beneath him in bed. And the pastry had been so generously slathered with frosting that a bit of it remained just above the pale pink line of her full lips, as if daring him to lick it off of her.

“Sean?” Helen prompted loudly, dragging him rudely out of his reverie.

He recovered completely, clamping successfully down on his libido, at least for the time being. But he cut his request shorter than he had originally intended in order to make it out the door in time to see just where that thoroughly enticing woman had gone once she’d left the coffee shop, making it just in time to see her go about four doors down to the flower shop that had sprung up several years ago.

He’d noted the shop’s opening at the time, but since he had no reason to go buying anyone he knew – who were nearly all men – flowers, he’d never met her.

But he was determined to change that, and did so the very next morning.

Tessa made it to work early the next day, having managed to the annoying blue truck for once. It was about nine thirty or so and she was futzing with her deliveries in the back – trying to get them into the cooler or sorted into the ones she wanted to display as quickly as possible – when she heard the bell ring that signaled someone had entered the shop, so she wandered out front to find one of a man standing amongst all of her flowers, looking extremely uncomfortable to be doing so, not to mention incongruous.

He was one of the most classically beautiful men she had ever seen in her life, and she had been a connoisseur since she was about eight. He wasn’t overly tall, but well built, with an unmistakable y-shape – broad chested, slim hiped with heavily muscled thighs

and a full head of very closely cropped dark brown hair as well as a neatly trimmed mustache and goatee.

She nearly dropped the big glass vases of flowers she was carrying when she first laid eyes on him. Her knees went weak and her heart began to pound. She wasn't that type of woman at all; the kind that got the vapors at the sight of a good looking guy. No man had ever affected her like that, and she wasn't any too happy that he *was*, either.

Sean saw her almost stumble and reached out to relieve her of her burdens, but she recovered quickly and waltzed right past him.

"Can I help you?" Tessa put the roses on display in the two bowed front windows, then turned back to him, holding out her hand. "I'm Tessa Martin. I'm the owner. What can I do for you today?"

They shook hands and Sean was glad to know that she shook hands like she meant it, not prissily grasping the very tip of his index and middle fingers with the very tip of her own as if she was afraid he had leprosy or something. She clutched all of his hand firmly, pumped up and down twice, and let go.

"I'm Sean Maddox. It's very nice to meet you. And it's not so much what you can do for me, but rather the other way around." He extended his arm to her, offering her the coffee he had in his left hand that she'd not even noticed until just then, as well as a small bag he'd clutched with his ring and pinky finger. "A large decaf, three splashes of skim, three Equals and a shake of cinnamon, right?"

Amazed, Tessa blinked owlshly, taking the drink from him a bit hesitantly. "Yes, that's exactly how I take it. Thank you."

"And an apple cider doughnut, warmed, with cream cheese frosting?" He was still proffering the bag, but only until he told her what it contained.

Tessa took what he offered, opening it to peer at its siren contents, sighing loudly and saying, still looking into the bag, "You are a very bad influence."

He chuckled, and the sound poured over her like so much heated frosting. She could no more stop herself from looking at him now than she could stop the sun from rising in the East. "How'd you know what I liked? I'm fussy as all get out, and you got it perfect the first time – even down to the doughnut." She left off that her last lover – not that that was what the man in front of her was going to become, of course – couldn't seem to remember her birthday after five years, much less the anal way she ordered her coffee, even in a podunk coffee place.

"I was behind you yesterday and heard you order it," he answered, unabashedly confessing that he'd been eavesdropping on her.

For some reason, that idea made her blush furiously, and she added defensively, “I’m particular about my coffee.”

He didn’t look in the least concerned or annoyed by her idiosyncrasy, answering softly but firmly, “That’s okay. I’m a particular man myself, especially when it comes to women.”

Tess’s mouth went Sahara dry at that, and she found she was having trouble swallowing because of it, so she took a big gulp of her coffee, scalding everything it touched in the process.

Smooth move, she chided herself as she nearly coughed up a lung.

Luckily he saw fit to look around the place a bit then, while she tried to surreptitiously assess the third degree burns to her tongue, palate and throat. “How long have you been open?” he asked casually.

“Nearly three years.”

“It looks like you’re doing okay.”

She had to smile a bit proudly. “Better than okay, actually. I’m ahead of where I’d thought I’d be.”

“Really? Good on you, then.” There was no trace of sarcasm in his tone whatsoever, as there would have been in Tighe’s if he was here. “It’s not easy to get a small business going nowadays.” His eyes settled on her in a look that was somehow much more intimate than she was really comfortable with, audaciously peaking her nipples from three feet away. “I own the garage on the way out of town.”

“Maddox Motors? I’ve seen it.” So far she’d been lucky enough not to need him, but old Bessie was getting on in years – hell, she was *already* on in years. She was working on ancient, and it would be convenient to know someone to take her to when she started showing signs of her age, especially since he was within walking distance. “How long have you been in that location?”

“Well, we’ve been there since about nineteen eighty, but I officially took it over from my Dad when I got back from a stint in Iraq about seven years ago.”

Somehow that wasn’t a surprising thing to hear from him. He had a very military bearing, kept his sandy blonde hair what appeared to be regulation short, and just . . . looked like a soldier, somehow. Tessa cleared her throat. “Well, thank you for your service.”

“You’re welcome.” No false modesty, no demurring, just flat, polite response.

But he had yet to take his eyes off her, and Tessa's entire body was beginning to flush as badly as she already knew her face was.

Especially when he took a step towards her, his eyes intent on hers. "So, does risking life and limb for God and country get me a date with a pretty lady?"

She couldn't stop herself. It just came out, force of habit. "I don't know. You'll have to find yourself a pretty lady to ask."

It wasn't as if she was butt ugly. She wasn't. But pretty? Not really, if she was honest with herself, and she always tried to be. She was . . . plain at best. She had probably come closest to pretty while she was living with Tighe and still making an attempt to look her best. Here, in the back of beyond, she'd let herself off the hook on a lot of the little, primping things she used to do. No more mani-pedis. No more nylons or uncomfortably high heeled shoes or slathering on make up every morning. There was no need.

After finding out that Tighe had been cheating on her for more than a year, right under her nose, she had sworn off of men entirely and decided to live for herself – no excuses, no more looking for Mr. Right or even Mr. Right Now. She could live fine without a man, and intended to do just that.

Besides, she was just wary enough naturally – even with Tighe, with whom she'd had the longest relationship of her life – that she'd never really trusted any man enough to tell him what she really wanted out of a relationship, and she couldn't imagine starting now, especially not with a man who – based on the full on reproachful look he was giving her at her disparaging comment about herself – honestly looked like he wouldn't hesitate in the least to tip her over his lap if she said or did something he didn't cotton to.

That thought had her blushing so badly she thought she might faint from it, and trying and failing to swallow down the lump of pure desire that had somehow lodged in her throat.

As she watched a thick eyebrow rise towards his hairline, she couldn't suppress the delicate shudder that replaced the earlier heat she'd been suffused with, although her nipples remained embarrassingly, noticeably rock hard beneath her blouse.

"I am asking a pretty lady," he said firmly, taking another step towards her, soft voice belying the steel beneath it. "I'm asking you, Tessa Martin. And I think you should consider your answer more carefully this time, because another one like that and you could find yourself in a heap of trouble."