

# LORRAINE HEATH

## HARD LOVIN' MAN



POCKET STAR BOOKS

New York London Toronto Sydney Singapore

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For Kathy Baker

For all the miles we've traveled without  
turning on the radio,  
The wrong turn that took us into Oklahoma,  
Searching for excitement in Clayton, New Mexico,  
Heading home from Denver at four in the morning,  
And stopping at roadside fruit stands along the way.

For your love of reading,  
Your joy at the discovery of a good book,  
Your unwavering enthusiasm for romance novels  
and authors.

For your title suggestions, the cover debates,  
and your keen insight,  
Your advice, consoling, cajoling,  
and encouragement,  
The honesty, tears, and laughter.

But most of all,  
For the treasured gift of your friendship.

# HARD LOVIN' MAN

# Chapter 1



Jack Morgan could spot trouble a mile away. Gazing through the cigarette-smoke-filled haze, he knew beyond a doubt that the girl sitting at the far end of the bar spelled *trouble* with capital letters.

*T-R-O-U-B-L-E.*

Her black shirt was a little too tight, a little too low, and a little too short, revealing a pierced navel that had winked at every male she passed as she sauntered back from the rest room. Her short-cropped spiked hair was an unnaturally bright orange.

The neon light cast by the sign hanging between the shelves lined with bottles of booze glittered off her earrings. She had a pierced nose, a pierced brow, and a pierced lower lip, and Jack was willing to bet money she'd extended her self-mutilation to include a pierced tongue.

He wondered what possessed any sane person to willingly have a needle poked into her flesh. Taking a swallow of his cold beer, he remembered wondering the same thing when he was in the army and had awoken from a drunken binge to discover a tattoo high on the back of his own left shoulder.

"Hey, Jack, ready for another one?"

The dew-coated mug wasn't quite empty, but the owner-bartender made his living based on how much people drank, not how long they sat. Still, Jack enjoyed simply sitting and studying people. Especially at the Sit 'n' Bull. Maybe because in his youth, he'd desperately wanted to be allowed inside the hallowed walls, to experience the mysteries that drew so many farmers, ranchers, and blue-collar workers to the place that those who arrived late had to park their trucks and SUVs in the weed-infested vacant lot behind the building.

"Not tonight, Morty. Did you happen to card that girl?"

Whether to improve his eyesight or his memory, Morty lifted his white brows, brows bushy enough that Jack wondered if the guy's hair had all migrated south. Morty kept his bald pate polished to a sheen that was as glossy as the countertop of his bar.

He glanced around suspiciously. "Which girl?"

"The one Dave's hitting on." Dave Lighten. Insurance salesman. Even a town as small as Hopeful, nestled within Houston's shadow, needed insurance salesmen.

Morty chuckled, a low rumble that caused his stomach to quiver. Every year, the day after Thanksgiving, he wrapped a Santa costume around that belly and collected toys that he delivered on Christmas Eve. No one knew how Morty determined which kids needed his gifts.

Until Jack had gained entry into the Sit 'n' Bull and learned about Morty's generous nature, he'd never

known who'd left the bicycle outside his trailer when he was eight. But he'd damn sure known it wasn't Santa Claus. By that age, he'd experienced enough in his young life not to believe in anything that promised to bring happiness.

"Yeah, right," Morty finally said when he stopped chuckling. "No self-respecting mama is gonna let her underage daughter walk out of the house dressed in that getup."

"Maybe her mother isn't the self-respecting type. Card her, Morty."

"Ah, Jack, geez, come on. I *did* card her, okay?"

"What year was she born?"

"I don't remember."

Jack took out his wallet and laid a five on the counter. "Five says she's sixteen."

Morty groaned. He knew the routine. He was diligent about not serving alcohol to kids who were underage. But he was getting older. Every now and then, one slipped past him.

Jack slid off the stool and walked the length of the bar until he reached Dave. The salesman had his head bowed close to the girl's, obviously trying to sell her on something. Probably the benefits of visiting the No Tell Motel, where a guest could drop two quarters into the Magic Fingers box on the nightstand. The payoff was a vibrating bed. Jack had seen Dave's car parked outside the motel so often he figured Dave had a frequent-visitor discount card—for both the motel and the Magic Fingers.

Jack clamped his hand over Dave's shoulder.



Dave jerked his head around, the alarm evident in his eyes quickly turning to relief. "Hey, Jack! How are you, man?"

"Not bad." Jack shifted his attention to the girl. She ran her gaze over him with an appreciation he'd long ago started taking for granted—as though she'd been contemplating tasting an appetizer with Dave, suddenly discovered the dessert was available, and decided that she'd like to sample that first.

Something about her teased at his memory. Something subtle. The dark green shade of her eyes, the slight bow shape of her mouth. Her abundant dark makeup distorted both, but still it was there. A shadowy familiarity that he couldn't quite place in spite of the fact that he was certain he'd never met her. She was either new to town or simply passing through. Either scenario would explain Dave honing in on her like a scent-specific search dog.

Without shifting his attention from her, Jack said, "Dave, why don't you head on home to your wife?"

She wrinkled her nose. "You're married?"

"Well, yeah, sorta," Dave stammered.

"How can you *sorta* be married, you jerk?"

Jack experienced his first spark of admiration for her. She might not have any taste in fashion, but she apparently possessed a hint of morality.

Dave glowered at Jack. "Thanks, Jack."

He patted Dave's shoulder. "Anytime, Dave. I'm always happy to help out. You know that. Say hi to Marsha for me."

Dave slunk away, and Jack dropped onto the vacated stool, hooking the heel of his boot over the bottom metal rung, narrowly avoiding having his knee bump against the girl's lower bare thigh. The handkerchief he carried in his hip pocket would probably cover more territory than her tight black skirt.

Dipping his gaze a fraction, he caught sight of her thick black shoes. In his opinion, they resembled something that might have been worn by Frankenstein's monster. Which possibly explained all the piercing. She was attempting to hold herself together.

"What's your poison?" he asked.

"Sex on the Beach."

She leisurely stroked her tongue around lips coated in dark red, and Jack realized he'd guessed wrong about the tongue piercing. No studs glittered back at him.

"And I'm not just talking about the drink," she added with a suggestive wink.

Oh, yeah, she was big trouble.

Raising his hand, Jack waved his fingers. Morty trotted over like an obedient dog.

"Sex on the Beach for the lady and a beer for me."

She giggled. Morty squirmed.

"I'll need to see your ID."

She giggled again and tapped Jack's chest with a dark red fingernail. "He looks like a big boy to me." She dropped her gaze to his lap. "A very big boy."

"Yeah, but you don't look like a very big girl," Jack said.

She gave the bartender a beguiling smile as she shoved her empty glass toward him. “You’ve already carded me, *Morty*,” she said with a sexy little shimmer of her shoulders.

Obvious relief washed over Morty’s face. “That’s what I told Jack.”

“You don’t remember looking at her license. Lady, show it to him.”

Abruptly, she stood. “You’re no fun.”

She had no idea.

He wrapped his hand around her arm with just enough pressure to give the unmistakable impression of authority with no threat. “Show *me* your ID.”

“I don’t have to show you jack shit.”

“Afraid you do.” With his free hand, he reached into the back hip pocket of his jeans and pulled out his badge. He always carried it—even when he was off duty, even when he wasn’t in uniform—because he was always on call.

“Fine,” she snapped.

She dropped her purse on the counter and scrounged around inside, finally pulling out her license. She flashed it at Morty. “There, see?”

Jack snatched it from her fingers, causing her to release an indignant screech of protest that nearly pierced his eardrums. He gave her license a quick perusal—all it required to detect its nonvalidity. He’d collect his winnings from Morty later.

“Impressive. But fake. Let’s go.”

“Go where?”

"To the station, where we can call your parents."

"I don't have parents."

"Your guardian, then."

"Fuck you!"

The toe of her heavy shoe made contact with his shin, sending shards of pain bursting in all directions from the point of impact. She screamed a steady stream of obscenities that made him reconsider his liberal views on censorship and freedom of speech.

Oh, yeah. He recognized trouble when he spotted it.

Kelley Spencer groggily slapped at the snooze button, but the alarm continued its shrill ringing. Slowly, her exhausted mind journeyed through the fog of sleep to become clearer, and she realized it wasn't the alarm that was jarring her awake but the telephone. Struggling up to an elbow, she reached for the phone while squinting at the red digital readout on her bedside clock. One A.M. Trepidation sliced through her, while panicked thoughts flashed through her mind.

*The police. A drunk driver. An accident.*

But that call had come eighteen months ago, and the ramifications had ensured that she'd be receiving no more late-night calls regarding her parents.

*Madison is in trouble again.*

But Madison was home. Safe. Looking like an angel, asleep in her bedroom on the other side of the apartment. Kelley had checked on her before she'd gone to bed following the ten o'clock news.

This call had to be an irritating wrong number. She snatched up the receiver. "Hello?"

"Ms. Gardner?"

The deep voice resonated with authority.

"That's my sister," she responded automatically.

Kelley's father had died of a heart attack when she was twelve. One of those strange, unbelievable, unexplainable occurrences. He'd been only thirty-eight. He didn't smoke, drink, or eat to excess. He'd been out on his regular morning jog in the nearby park. By the time her mother had become concerned because he hadn't returned and went to look for him, it had been too late.

Two years later, her mother had married Marcus Gardner. Kelley had been fifteen when Madison was born.

"I'm trying to locate Ms. Gardner's guardian," the nameless voice continued.

Kelley's stomach began its ritual knotting as a fissure of raw fear ripped through her. She'd had other calls like this one in the dead of night. But that had been in Dallas. Not here. Not in this small town of nine thousand that greeted visitors with a welcome sign on either end of Main Street boasting about a state football championship earned in 1969. "That would be me. Kelley Spencer."

"We have your sister in custody down at the police station. We need you to come in."

Her heart kicked into overdrive. Cordless phone in hand, she threw back the covers, stood, and began

rushing to the other side of the apartment to Madison's room. "That's impossible."

"I'm afraid it's very possible, ma'am. The chief brought her in himself."

She opened the door to Madison's bedroom and switched on the light. The red bulbs cast an eerie glow over a black rumpled bedspread and bloodred furniture. Freakish, Satanic-looking posters were stapled to the walls. She always felt as though she'd dropped into hell when she entered the room.

Kelley tried so hard to be the perfect parent, to balance discipline against freedom, but Madison always pushed the edge of the envelope, tested Kelley's patience.

Kelley was hit with the unexpected memory of Madison as a baby, sweet and innocent, with the wrinkled, scrunched-up face of an old soul and a pitiful wail.

When Kelley had moved home nine years ago, Madison was still sweet, cuddling against Kelley's side at every opportunity. Then, a little more than a year and a half ago, their parents had been killed by a drunk driver. Kelley had assumed responsibility for raising Madison, something she'd thought she was prepared to handle.

Instead, she'd made one ghastly mistake after another, each one serving to spotlight Kelley's ineptitude as a mother. No matter how hard she tried, she always fell short. In the beginning, she'd convinced herself that raising a child from infancy was different—parent

and child grew together, adapted, adjusted. Although she and Madison lacked that foundation, she feared the problem was more deeply rooted. Her escalating failures within the past year had forced her to accept the truth: she lacked some sort of motherhood gene.

"Ms. Spencer?" The deep voice cut into her thoughts.

She sighed wearily. "Yeah, I'll be there as soon as I can."

Where had sweet little Madison gone?

"Thank you, ma'am. Just check at the front desk when you get here."

"Unfortunately, I'm familiar with the routine," she told him, resigned to facing the battle ahead.

She clicked the off button on the phone. Being a parent was never easy. Being a single parent was much more difficult. Coming onto the scene during the teenage years was virtually impossible.

With another deep sigh, she shuffled back to her room. She was beginning to doubt her ability to survive living with someone who'd suddenly become rebellious. She'd read all the self-help books, but she had no idea how to reach the most important person in her life.

## Chapter 2



Leaning back in his chair, with his booted feet crossed on the corner of his desk, his hands folded behind his head, Jack studied the girl sitting before him. She had *attitude* written—and pierced—all over her. Probably tattooed as well.

She was also scared to death. Her green gaze kept darting to the closed door of his office, and she'd gnawed all that horrible gunk off her lips. Now she was busily working on her fingernails.

"So, what happened?" he asked. "You were standing too close to a jewelry box when it suddenly exploded?"

"Ha ha. That's pretty fucking funny."

He straightened, his boots hitting the floor with a resounding thud. Her body jerked while her eyes grew big and round. He leaned menacingly toward her. He'd had the menacing look down pat since he was a kid. It was the only way he'd managed to survive.

"If you use the *f* word in my presence again, I'm hauling you down to the bathroom and washing your mouth out with some pretty vile-tasting soap."



Apparently not impressed with his threat, she visibly relaxed and rolled her eyes. “*F word?* That is so totally lame.”

*F word?* Surely he hadn’t said *that*. He retraced his thoughts. Shit! He had. How intimidating did that make him? Not intimidating at all.

He’d slipped because she was just a kid. He could only hope he never made the same careless mistake while he was interrogating a hardened criminal. Not that many resided in Hopeful. But still, he had a hard-fought-for reputation to maintain.

“How lame is it that you have a sewer mouth?” he asked.

She curled her upper lip. “You wouldn’t wash my mouth out with soap. I’d sue your butt for police harassment.”

“Darlin’, I don’t make threats I’m not prepared to carry out.” He eased back a little. “Look, I know you’re scared—”

“I’m not scared. I just want to go home.”

“Your sister should be here any minute.”

“She’s going to be so totally freaked out.”

“Does she ever hit you?” he asked.

She looked at him as though he’d just spoken in Klingon. “Of course not.”

“But she freaks out easily?”

“Wouldn’t you if the police called you at one o’clock in the morning to tell you that they’d arrested your kid?”

She wasn’t technically arrested, but he hadn’t in-