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Melissa gazed up at him. Her eyes darkened, her gaze fluttering down to settle on his mouth.

His breath hitched, trapped somewhere deep in his lungs. He bent toward her, his own gaze fixed on the Cupid's bow curve of her pink lips.

He wanted to taste her. He wanted it more than he wanted his next breath.

In the distance, a dog barked. She stepped away from him.

Aching with frustration, he followed her up the sidewalk to the house. As they neared the wooden porch steps, something just in front of the first step glittered in the morning sunlight, catching Aaron's eye.

His heart jumped into his throat. "Stop!"

Melissa jerked to a halt.

"That," he said, "is a trip wire."

"What?"

"Melissa, I think there's a bomb somewhere around your porch."

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For Jenn, who makes me a better writer every time.



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BACHELOR SHERIFF

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alabama native Paula Graves wrote her first book, a mystery starring herself and her neighborhood friends, at the age of six. A voracious reader, Paula loves books that pair tantalizing mystery with compelling romance. When she's not reading or writing, she works as a creative director for a Birmingham advertising agency and spends time with her family and friends. She is a member of Southern Magic Romance Writers, Heart of Dixie Romance Writers and Romance Writers of America.

Paula invites readers to visit her Web site, www.paulagraves.com.

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CAST OF CHARACTERS

Melissa Draper—This contracts lawyer knows she's not the type of woman who inspires passion, good or bad. So why is someone going to dangerous lengths to see her dead?

Aaron Cooper—Melissa's high school crush has grown up to be a well-known heartbreaker. He's also the deputy sheriff assigned to investigate her case.

Riley Patterson—Aaron's brother-in-law proves to be invaluable help investigating the attempts on Melissa's life. But is he also right about Aaron's growing feelings for Melissa?

Derek Draper—Melissa's father is well-known around town as an upstanding citizen. But Melissa knows he has a dark side.

Carter Morgan—Melissa's boss is also her trusted mentor.

Alice Gaines—Melissa's coworker is on vacation, but is it odd that nobody can reach her at all?

Dalton Brant—Melissa's fellow lawyer is jealous of her relationship with their boss, Carter Morgan. Is he jealous enough to want her out of the picture altogether?

Amy DeLong—When Melissa's friend becomes the victim of an attack meant for Melissa, the attempted murder could give them a clue about the killer's identity.

Evan Hallman—Melissa's ex-boyfriend has a very good motive for revenge against Melissa, but he's safely locked away in another state. Or is he?

Chapter One

Jasper's low whine jarred Melissa Draper awake. Blinking to clear the sleep from her eyes, she peered into the inky gloom at the foot of her bed, where the Beagle-mix puppy usually slept. But Jasper wasn't there.

Her heart quickening, she sat upright. "Jasper?"

She kicked off the bedcovers and shivered, surprised to find the room had grown frigidly cold during the night. From the doorway, Jasper whimpered softly.

Melissa turned on the bedside lamp. Nothing happened. The digital alarm clock on her bedside table was also dark.

The power must be out. That explained the cold.

Outages weren't unusual where Melissa lived. Fallen tree limbs, lightning strikes—any number of events could cause a break in her power supply. She'd bought a gasoline generator last year for that very reason.

She kept a flashlight in the bedside table drawer. She found it and turned it on. A beam of light sliced the darkness, bouncing off a light haze.

Then the acrid smell of smoke hit her nose.

"Come, Jasper." She grabbed her robe and entered the narrow hallway. The puppy kept pace as she headed for the stairs.

As the smell of burning wood and plastic assaulted her in

a bitter cloud, her heart rate soared. Now she could hear the faint shriek of the smoke detector going off downstairs.

Her house was on fire.

The hallway smoke detector went off right over her head, making her jump. Leaning against the wall, her hand over her galloping heart, she tried to think what to do next.

The phone in her room depended on electricity, but her cell phone usually worked, even this far out of town. It was in her purse downstairs. She had to get to it.

Gagging on the acrid haze, she crouched low and hurried to the top of the stairs. She paused there, peering down the steep stairs, her head swimming. She hated heights, even in full daylight when she could see each step down. With the bottom floor barely visible through the smoky haze, the dizzy sensation was that much worse.

Clinging to the rail all the way down, she reached the first floor unscathed. The smoke seemed to be coming from the back of the house, near the kitchen. Had she left the stove on?

She dropped to her knees, crawling through the thickening smoke toward her purse on the foyer table. Purse in hand, she groped her way to the door, reached up and twisted the dead bolt.

Nothing happened.

She tugged at the dead bolt again, but the lock didn't turn.

Beside her Jasper started to bark wildly, startling her. "It's okay, buddy, we're going to be okay." She could get out through the windows, breaking one if it didn't open.

First, she had to stay calm and think, while she still had time. What could she save before the fire consumed it?

Her pro bono files were in a metal file cabinet down the hall, but there were copies of those on disks in a safe-deposit box at the bank, plus digital copies of vital records on her

laptop as well. The work files in the cabinet were just copies of files stored at the law office. There were some photos she didn't want to lose, but she wouldn't risk her life going back upstairs for them. Clothes, food and appliances could be replaced by the insurance check. All she had to save were her purse, her notebook computer and her dog.

She swung the long strap of her purse over her neck and grabbed the attaché case containing her notebook computer. "Let's go, Jasper."

Out of the corner of her eye, she spotted movement outside. Turning her head, she saw what might have been a shadowy figure disappear past the far window facing the front porch.

She froze for a second, until a popping sound coming from the kitchen spurred her into action again. She dug her phone from her purse and dialed 911, reaching out to calm her frantic dog. "Jasper, shh..."

A female voice answered. "Chickasaw County 911."

"This is Melissa Draper. I live on Tuckahaw Road, south of the bridge. My house is on fire." Reaching up, she tried the door again. The lock wouldn't budge. "I'm also having trouble getting out of the house."

After a brief pause, the woman replied, "We've got units on the way. Is there a first floor window you can open?"

Melissa peered up at the windows that looked out on the porch. The memory of the mysterious shadow gave her a moment's pause. Had someone set the fire deliberately? Maybe cut the power to the house?

Was he outside, waiting for her?

She'd have to take the risk.

She pushed to her feet. "I'm putting the phone in the pocket of my robe. Just a minute." She swept the window drapes aside. Moonlight washed the front porch outside with cold blue light, dimmed by a light haze from the fire at the

back of her house. From her vantage point, she saw nothing and no one moving outside.

She unlocked the window and tugged at the sash. Decades of old paint put up a fight, but she finally heard a soft crack over the wail of the smoke alarm, and the window rattled open. She unlatched the screen and pushed it onto the porch. It fell with a soft clatter.

“Come on, Jasper.” She picked up the trembling dog and lowered him out the window onto the porch. Pulling up the hem of her robe, she crawled out the window in a hurry, hauling her purse and attaché over the sill with her. She landed with an awkward thump on the porch beside her frantic, barking puppy.

“We’re out,” she said into her cell phone, her gaze sweeping the front lawn for any sign of intruders. All she saw was winter-browned grass spreading twenty yards square, hemmed by woods on both sides and the narrow lane in front.

“You need to get away from the house. Head to a neighbor’s house if it’s too cold to wait outside,” the 911 operator suggested.

Melissa’s Volkswagen GTI sat in the driveway, a safe distance from the house. She and Jasper could wait there.

On her way to the porch steps, she paused by the door. Shining her flashlight on the dead bolt, she caught her breath when she spotted a small stick wedged into the keyhole. That’s why she hadn’t been able to unlock the front door.

Had someone put the stick there on purpose?

In the distance, wailing sirens broke the silence of the dark night. Melissa kept moving, clicking her fingers at Jasper and hoping he was unnerved enough by their current ordeal to follow her rather than haring off in all directions the way he usually did when he was off his leash. To her relief, he stayed close, hopping right into the car when she opened the door.

The car's interior was frigidly cold, making her wish that she'd considered her warm winter coat one of the necessary things to save from the fire. She doubted the cold engine would generate enough heat to make a difference before the firemen arrived, so she didn't risk it, huddling close to Jasper, grateful, for once, to have his warm puppy breath in her face.

A column of thick black smoke roiled from the back of her house. No flames visible yet, but a faint glow tinted the rising smoke and she tried not to think too hard about what parts of her house might be burning to the ground while she waited for the firemen to arrive.

She checked the car door locks one more time. Someone had stuck that twig in the dead bolt. Might have been a prank, but what if it wasn't? If Jasper hadn't started whining when he did, she might not have awakened until fire had engulfed the entire house. The time wasted trying to open the sabotaged door could have been the difference between living and dying.

But who would have done such a thing?

"ARSON?" Aaron Cooper blinked sluggishly at his alarm clock. 4:35 a.m. He pushed himself to a sitting position on the side of the bed and listened to the Chickasaw County Sheriff's Department dispatcher rattle off the address over the phone. "Okay, on my way."

He dressed quickly and snapped his service pistol, a lethal black Smith & Wesson M&P40, into his lightweight belt holster, unable to hold back a smile as he did so. His recent promotion to the Sheriff's Department Investigative Unit had a few perks, he had to admit. Like losing the bulky duty belt that came with the patrol uniform.

The January predawn was as cold as it had looked through his bedroom window. He tugged his leather jacket more

tightly around him and headed for the Ford F-10 parked in his driveway.

All Dispatch had told him was that a complainant had called in a suspicious fire to 911. Apparently no casualties, thank God, but if someone had tried to burn the house down around the owner it was attempted murder and a pretty damned big deal, especially in a quiet rural place like Chickasaw County.

He left the Gossamer Ridge city limits and headed southeast toward the county line. The address was Tuckahaw Road, which he knew from his days on patrol was mostly woods dotted with the occasional farm. Once he crossed the old steel bridge that spanned the meandering waters of Tuckahaw Branch, the houses were fewer and farther between along the twisting country road.

After another sharp curve, the road straightened, and Aaron spotted a fire engine and two Chickasaw County Sheriff's Department cruisers parked haphazardly in front of a two-story farmhouse ahead. The house was still standing, he noted as he pulled his truck behind the closest cruiser. That was a plus.

One of his fellow deputies, Blake Clayton, greeted him as he approached. "Fire made a mess of the kitchen area, but the truck got here in time to stop it from spreading."

"Started in the kitchen?" Aaron fell into step with Blake as the deputy led him to the back of the house. A kitchen fire didn't sound much like arson.

"Back of the house behind the kitchen, actually," Blake corrected. Rounding the corner, they found a couple of firefighters, still clad in their heavy slickers and rubber boots, crouched in front of the charred remains of what looked to be a gas generator.

One of the firemen moved, revealing a small, slim woman standing a few feet behind him, a frown creasing her forehead

as she watched the firemen investigating the scorched areas behind the house. Homeowner, Aaron guessed. She looked familiar.

Her gaze shifted, bumping with his. Her mouth fell open slightly, her blue eyes widening with a flicker of recognition. He searched his brain for where he knew her. Definitely not an ex-girlfriend; he'd never gone for brunettes, although he had to admit he was intrigued by this particular brunette, even as disheveled and smoke-smudged as she was at the moment. She dropped her gaze, and he felt an odd sense of disappointment.

Blake Clayton spoke to the woman. "Ms. Draper? This is Deputy Cooper, one of the Sheriff's Department investigators. Deputy Cooper, this is Melissa Draper, the homeowner."

Memories clicked into place. Melissa Draper. From his high school graduating class. Geeky, shy, total brainiac. No wonder he hadn't remembered her at first. He'd have barely remembered her back in high school.

Not that he was particularly proud of that fact.

Aaron held out his hand for a shake, then dropped it as he realized Melissa's arms were wrapped around a shivering puppy. The dog looked up at him with scared brown eyes and let out a soft moan somewhere between a whimper and a howl.

"Deputy Cooper and I have met," Melissa said to Blake, though her gaze remained locked with Aaron's. He felt an odd flutter in the center of his chest. "I thought you'd be off playing pro football somewhere."

He felt an old, bitter twinge of regret. "Blew out my knee first week of training camp, so I had to find another career."

She looked genuinely sympathetic. He wouldn't have blamed her for indulging in a little pleasure at his downfall instead. High school social politics had been brutal, and

people like Melissa Draper had always ended up outside the in-crowd.

“What about you? What’re you doing these days?” he asked.

“I’m a lawyer.” She didn’t bother to hide the touch of pride in her voice.

Figured. She’d been voted most likely to succeed, hadn’t she? Something like that.

The puppy whined again, drawing Aaron’s attention back to the present. The poor thing was shivering. Melissa didn’t look much warmer herself. Time to get his mind back on the job and get the two of them someplace warm and safe.

He addressed the two firemen who’d continued examining the charred generator while he’d been talking to Melissa. “Any verdict yet, guys?”

Perry Davis, the younger of the two and an old high school teammate, glanced at Aaron. “Still looking.”

“How much longer before I can have my house back?” Melissa asked quietly. She was stroking the puppy’s head soothingly, shushing his occasional whimpers, and looked ready to pass out from stress and exhaustion.

“The damage is limited to your kitchen, but the power company’s gonna have to reroute your power supply. You don’t have a generator anymore, and even if you did, it would still require pretty massive rewiring before you’d get any juice to your house.” Perry Davis gave her an apologetic look. “I figure it’ll be at least a week. Depends on how quickly the power company can get technicians on the scene and whether your insurance company will want a further investigation first.”

- Melissa looked ready to crumple into a heap right at Aaron’s feet. He reached out, cupping her elbow. She gave a start, pulling away to look at him with wary eyes.

He dropped his hand away, guilty about giving her a fright.

Her nerves were probably stretched to the snapping point at the moment. “You can probably call your insurance agent as early as seven,” he murmured, gesturing for her to follow him away from the damage site. “Meanwhile, let’s get you and Scooter here somewhere warm.”

Her lips twitched at his words. “His name is Jasper,” she corrected softly. “And somewhere warm sounds wonderful.”

“I’ll drive you to your folks’ place. They’re still out on Hickory Bluff Road, right?”

“No,” she said quickly, darting him a look of dismay that caught him by surprise. “I mean, yes, they still live on Hickory Bluff Road, but I don’t want to go there. I can find a hotel near my office—”

“Hotels won’t take Jasper.” A sudden image flashed through his mind, catching him off guard—a picture of himself taking Melissa home to his own house, filling her full of hot chocolate and tucking her and her whiny puppy beneath the warm covers of his bed. Ruthlessly, he pushed the surprising image aside.

“I’ll find somewhere to stay,” she insisted, although he could see the wheels of her mind churning desperately for a solution to her problem.

“You could stay at my folks’ place. They have a guest cottage they keep up for situations just like this.”

She arched a dark eyebrow at him. “They take in a lot of house fire refugees?”

“Okay, maybe not situations *exactly* like this.”

“There’s still the problem of Jasper,” she said.

“Is he house-trained?”

“Yes, but—”

“Not a problem.” He glanced at his watch. It was after five o’clock now. His parents were early risers. “I’ll give Mom a

call, set it up.” He turned to Blake, who was looking at him with a puzzled expression. “What?”

“Nothing,” Blake said, but the puzzled look didn’t go away.

“Perry, is Ms. Draper okay to go upstairs and pack a bag for herself?”

Perry looked away from his examination of the ground around the ruined generator. “Oh, yeah. The damage inside was limited to the kitchen, and the structural supports look like they avoided any major damage.”

Aaron put his hand on Melissa’s shoulder. She flinched again, and he dropped his hand away. “Sorry.”

“You just startled me.” She didn’t meet his eyes.

“Why don’t you go pack a couple of bags—anything you’ll need for the next week or two—then I’ll drive you to the lake.”

“I really don’t want to put your mother to any trouble—”

“My mother lives for this kind of thing,” he said firmly.

Melissa looked at him through narrowed eyes, as if gauging whether or not he was telling the truth. Finally she relaxed, giving a short nod as she tucked the puppy under her arm and headed around the house to the front entrance.

“What the hell was that?” Blake asked as soon as she was out of earshot.

“What?”

“Since when do you take women home to your mother?”

“She’s just an old friend.”

“Y’all were never friends,” Perry shot over his shoulder.

“She helped me with my calculus once,” Aaron defended.

“What’s the big deal? Mom lives to take in strays.”

“Strays? Nice, Cooper. Real nice.” Perry made a face.

“You know what I mean.”