

Full Blast

Chapter One

Jamie Swift had been in the newspaper business long enough to realize it was a lot like being a waitress. You had to meet the needs of those you served -- the rich, the poor, the in-between, even the crazies who complained no matter what you did. And like a waitress, you had to hope the tips were good. A big tip could make all the difference. A big tip in her case meant headlines, and she was in the business of finding headlines. But they didn't come easy in a small southern town where life was, for the most part, uneventful, even predictable. She had to scramble for newsworthy events.

So here she was, once again, sitting at her desk, sifting through stories, looking for a new slant or an idea to make it more interesting to the reading public. She was so intent on what she was doing that she jumped when someone tapped on her door.

"You are not going to believe this!" a voice Jamie recognized suddenly blurted. Sixty-year-old Vera Bankhead rushed into Jamie's office and locked the door behind her.

Jamie glanced up. "What is it?" she asked, straightening in her chair and trying to work the kinks out of her neck from sitting in one position for so long. She had come in early, hoping to work undisturbed. "You got a good tip for me?" she asked the woman before her. "Give me a headline, and I'll kiss the ground you walk on."

"This is even better." Vera paused, as if to add a little drama to what she was about to say. The hairpins had popped out from her gray beehive hairdo, and her glasses were askew. She shoved them high on her nose and glanced about as if to make certain they were alone. She eyed the large plate glass window overlooking the courthouse square where automatic sprinklers were doing damage control to a parched lawn brought on by a record-breaking July heat wave. Vera marched over and snapped the blinds closed.

Jamie arched one brow. "This must be big."

"It's bigger than when Lorraine Brown caught her husband doing the nasty with Beth Toomey on a sofa in the back office of the VFW Hall."

"Wow. Wasn't she jailed for going after them with a letter opener?"

"Yeah, and Tom refused to bail her out until she signed an agreement stating she wouldn't do him bodily harm afterward. She kicked his butt anyway the minute they released her."

"So tell me."

"You're not going to believe it," the woman repeated.

"Vera, out with it already!"

Vera held up a white paper sack. She reached into it and pulled out a brownie. "Taste it."

Jamie's mouth watered at the sight of the chocolate goodie. "I really shouldn't. I've already had three donuts this morning. I can barely button the top of my jeans."

Vera gave her that look, the one that said she wasn't going to take no for an answer. And Vera could be fierce. Although she still worked as Jamie's secretary, fear and intimidation had prompted Jamie to promote her to assistant editor of the Gazette as well. That and the fact Vera carried a .38 Smith and Wesson in her purse. Jamie was almost sure she wouldn't pull it on her; Vera was the closest thing she'd had to a mother, but it was best to humor her.

"Okay, okay." Jamie reached for the brownie and tasted it. "Yum, that's good." She finished it off in three bites.

"Do you feel any different?" Vera asked, eyeing her closely.

"Yeah, I want another one. I can always buy larger jeans."

"This isn't just any brownie," Vera said in a conspiratorial whisper. "There are rumors floating around that Lyle Betts is putting aphrodisiacs in them."

Jamie arched one brow. Lyle Betts owned Sunshine Bakery, and was considered a pillar of the community. He was president of the Jaycees, coached little league, and played Santa Claus for the children's unit at the hospital every year. "No way," she said.

Vera crossed her heart. "As God is my witness."

Jamie pondered it. Vera was a strict Southern Baptist; she only lied when absolutely necessary.

"Do you have any more?"

"Yeah, I bought extra. I figured we should do a little experimenting. We'll eat a couple more, and then compare notes."

"Oh, Lord," Jamie said, as Vera divvied them up. The last thing she needed was to start feeling horny. It had been three weeks since she'd laid eyes on sexy and mysterious Maximillian Holt, the man who blew into her life from time to time just long enough to turn her world upside-down and inside-out. The same man she had already voted most likely to climb beneath the sheets with first chance she got.

"I've already had three," Vera said, "and I don't feel a thing except for a little indigestion. Chocolate does that to me."

"I'm sure it's just a bunch of hype to sell brownies," Jamie said, hoping she was right. Lately she'd been having x-rated dreams where she and Max played starring roles. They did things she was certain were illegal in most states.

"And get this," Vera said. "Maxine Chambers quit her job at the library and just opened a lingerie shop right on Main Street. And guess what she named it? Sinful Delights."

Jamie couldn't hide her surprise. She couldn't imagine the prim librarian doing such a thing.

"And that's not all," Vera went on. "Folks say she's got a whole display of unmentionables hanging in her window where God and everybody can see them. She just undraped it today. Elbert Swank said his jaw fell open so hard when he saw them that he almost lost his dentures on the sidewalk out front. I would have given anything to see that."

"A new lingerie shop," Jamie mused. "Imagine that." She tried to keep her excitement at bay. Beaumont needed a good lingerie store, a place where cotton panties and practical bras weren't the order of the day.

"Of course I got my information second hand so I'll have to get over there and check it out personally. You know how I am about getting my facts straight."

"Maybe she'll advertise with us," Jamie said. "We can always use the business."

"Oh, pooh. We're going to make money on that new personals section you started. How many people have written in so far?"

"We must have about ten total; seven from men, three from women. Pretty good for a small town newspaper, don't you think?" Jamie had hoped the ads would bring in well-needed revenue and attract more readers. It was too early to tell, but she remained confident.

"I'm keeping my fingers crossed," Vera said. She stepped closer. "One ad in particular caught my attention," she almost whispered. "It was in yesterday's paper. The heading read 'Ready, Willing, and Able'. Sounds like a winner to me, seeing as how most men in my age bracket have a little trouble in the able department."

Jamie laughed out loud. "Vera Bankhead, I am shocked!"

Vera grinned. "Hey, even a woman my age has needs."

"Perhaps you should respond to the ad."

"What if he's ugly? You know I can't abide an ugly man. Maybe you should give me his name first."

Jamie shook her head. "You know the ads are strictly confidential."

"I'll bet I could figure out who he is. I know everybody in this town."

Which is why Jamie had insisted on handling the personals section, she reminded herself. She kept the ads locked in a file cabinet in her office. As much as she loved Vera, it was a well-known fact the woman was the biggest gossip in town. Jamie shrugged as though it made no difference. "I would see that your letter reached him."

"I'll have to think about it."

Jamie sighed wistfully. "Well, one thing is certain. Love is definitely in the air in the town of Beaumont, South Carolina. I think it's romantic." Jamie had only recently come to realize just what a romantic she was, and she knew Max Holt was responsible. She had begun to daydream about their relationship, had begun to wonder where it was going. She wanted him in her life permanently, and that scared the hell out of her.

"Sounds more like L-U-S-T to me," Vera replied. "It's the heat. Everybody in town is acting strange. If they start eating these brownies they're going to be out of control."

Jamie didn't want to talk about lust because, once again, it brought Max to mind. Max, who was too gorgeous for his own good and knew it. Max, who clearly lusted after her but kept his true feelings to himself. Not that she didn't have a bad case of lust as well; it's what drew them together like iron shavings to a magnet, what made her skin literally ache for his touch.

It had been that way from the moment they'd first laid eyes on each other, when Max had come to Beaumont to aid his brother-in-law, now the mayor, in an attempt to clean up town corruption. Max had ridden in on his white horse, or in his case, a two million dollar car with enough technology to run a small country. Max's investigation had dragged Jamie right into the middle of it; she'd found herself dodging bullets from hit men, almost getting blown to smithereens by a car bomb, and landing in the path of a monster size alligator.

Okay, so maybe she was exaggerating the size of the alligator, but all alligators looked big when you were treading water and happened to be in their path.

Most women with half a brain would have grabbed their purses and said, "See ya," but not Jamie. She had followed Max to Tennessee to find the person responsible for hiring the hit.

Simply put, Max was a philanthropist with brains and money, and as long as there was a cause or an injustice, he would be there come hell or high water.

"My stomach feels funny," Vera said. "I think I ate too many brownies."

Jamie looked up. "Yeah?" She wouldn't tell Vera she was having a bad case of butterflies. The woman would attribute it to the brownies, but Jamie knew better. She was thinking about the last time she and Max were together in what could only be described as a compromising position. Sooner or later, things were bound to come to a head.

She and Max couldn't go on this way forever, but she was afraid to hope for more. She could fantasize all she wanted about a lasting relationship, but Max did not impress her as a man who could be tied down to any woman for very long.

"It's probably all in my mind," Vera said. "Lyle Betts most likely started the rumor just to get people into his bakery." She glanced about the office. "Where is Fleas, by the way?"

"Huh?"

"Are you even listening to me? Where is your dog? You know, that ugly hound you bring to work with you every day because he sulks if you leave him at home?"

"He's at the vet. And he's not ugly."

"I hope he's getting his anal glands expressed. I can't live with that flatulence problem much longer."

Jamie had inherited Fleas, a wrinkled, forlorn-faced bloodhound some weeks back. At the time she had desperately needed a vehicle, and, trying to save money, had bought a rust bucket of a pickup truck. The car salesman, who claimed the dog was attached to the truck, had knocked fifty bucks off the price of the truck as an incentive for her to take the dog. They were bonding rather well or at least as well as could be expected with a dog that had chronic gas.

"He's being neutered today," Jamie said. "Poor thing," she added. "I'll bet Dr. Adams has his nuts on a chopping block as we speak."

Vera shuddered. "I don't even want to think about it."

They were interrupted when someone tapped on the door. "Pardon me," a female voice said.

Vera and Jamie glanced toward the door. Jamie felt her jaw drop to her collarbone. Vera gaped as well.

"I'm sorry to disturb you," the woman said, "but there was nobody out front."

Jamie continued to stare. The woman had coal black hair that fell to her waist. Sparkly blue eye shadow colored her lids, and her lashes were long enough to paint the side of a barn. "May I help you?" Jamie managed.

The woman stepped into the room. Her skirt was short and tight; her blouse cut low, emphasizing perfect over-sized breasts. Jamie decided either God had been very generous in the boob department or the woman was stuffed to the gills with silicone.

"My name is Destiny Moultrie," she said in a husky voice. "I'm here about the job."

Vera tossed Jamie a suspicious look. "What job? You've decided to replace me, haven't you? You'd rather have some Elvira-Erin Brockovich look-alike with big knockers sitting out front."

"I don't know anything about this," Jamie said, holding out both hands. She looked at the woman. "What job?" she asked, echoing Vera's question.

"The advice columnist. You've been turning it over in your mind for weeks."

"I have?"

Vera looked at Jamie. "You have?"

Jamie shifted in her seat. "Um, well... "

"You never mentioned it to me," a very peeved Vera interrupted. "You've always come to me with your ideas."

The woman looked from Vera to Jamie. "I didn't mean to cause friction. Perhaps we should discuss this in private, Miss Swift."

Vera took offense. "Miss Swift doesn't keep secrets from me. I know more about what's going on around here than anyone else." She tossed Jamie a dark look. "At least I thought I did."

Jamie couldn't mask her confusion. "Vera, please, not now."

But Vera was not deterred. "First, you take the personals section away from me because you don't trust me, and now this. I should quit. I should hand in my resignation and go on one of those senior citizen's cruises that serve seven meals a day. I could meet a nice widower, and sow a few wild oats. I still have a few oats left, you know."

"Vera..." Jamie fought the urge to crawl beneath her desk. They were acting anything but professional. But she knew better than to argue. In Vera's mind, Jamie was still an unruly kid who'd never been properly disciplined by her father.

"Seven meals a day?" Destiny said. "That's a lot of food. I would bust right out of my clothes."

"You're already busting out of your clothes," Vera said. She turned to Jamie. "On second thought, I'm not quitting because I've been here longer than anyone, and I'm not going to risk losing my benefits. Furthermore, you can't fire me. It was your daddy, God rest his soul, who hired me, not you." She gave a huff and marched from the room, but not before slamming the door behind her.

"Uh oh, I blew it," Destiny said.

Jamie turned to her visitor. She was intrigued. "Please sit down, Miss Moultrie," she said, using her professional voice. She smiled serenely, as though it were an every day occurrence for her

secretary to pitch a fit. Okay, so it was an everyday occurrence, she reminded herself. Vera was probably out front right now polishing her .38.

"Please call me Destiny," the woman said. She took one of the chairs directly across from Jamie's desk. "I'm sorry for barging in like this, but I sensed you would be making a decision soon, and I wanted to be the first to apply."

Jamie merely looked at her.

"You have been thinking about starting an advice column, right?" Without warning, the woman smacked her forehead. "Oh, man, I hope I'm not in the wrong place."

"The wrong place?" Jamie realized she was repeating a lot of what was being said.

Destiny pulled out a small notebook and flipped through several pages. "Is your middle name Leigh?"

Jamie nodded. "Yes. It was my mother's first name." Now why had she gone and given out personal information to some stranger she'd probably never see again?

"Yeah, I know about your mother. She walked out when you were still in diapers."

Jamie arched both brows. "Excuse me, but I don't see the point of all this."

Destiny looked up. "Sorry. I shouldn't have mentioned the part about your mother. I know you still find it painful at times."

"What else do you know?"

"There's an old tire swing hanging in your backyard, am I right?"

Jamie snapped her fingers. "I've got it. You're a private investigator, aren't you? Who hired you, and for what reason?"

"No, I'm not. Just answer this one last question. Do you have a bar of Dove soap in your lingerie drawer?"

Jamie felt the color drain from her face. "Who are you? How do you know about the soap?"

"I just do."

Jamie leveled her gaze at the woman. Her astonishment had an edge of anger to it. "Tell me more about the soap."

"Are you sure?" When Jamie nodded, she went on. "The scent reminds you of your mother, even though you remember little else about her."

Jamie felt the goose bumps rise on her arms. She was quiet for a moment. "I'm going to ask you again. How do you know this?"

The woman sighed. "I'm psychic. Sort of."

Jamie did a gigantic eye-roll. "Sort of? What does that mean?"

"I have visions, and I'm right a lot of the time, unless I'm under a lot of stress, then I might make a mistake now and then. It's a simple case of performance anxiety; sort of like sex. But I get it right more often than not."

Jamie sighed. It was really turning out to be a weird morning. First Vera with her brownies, and now she was conversing with a woman who claimed to be psychic. She had time for neither because she had to concentrate on getting a newspaper out. "Miss Moultrie, um, Destiny... "

"I'm working on getting better," Destiny said. "I practice every night." She paused. "You don't believe in psychics, do you?"

"Not exactly."

"See, I knew that." The woman licked the tip of her finger and drew a short imaginary line in the air as though marking her success. Turquoise rings circled every finger, bracelets jangled on her wrists. "There are a lot of phonies out there. Some claim to be one hundred percent accurate. There's no such thing."

"I wasn't, um, looking for a psychic. Just an advice columnist." There. She'd gone and admitted it.

"You've already got Dear Abby."

"My column was going to be for locals only. To sort of compliment... "

"Your new personals section," Destiny said. "People would be more intrigued by a psychic. And I've got the perfect name for it. The Divine Love Goddess Advisor." She pulled out an envelope and handed it to Jamie. "Why don't you look over my resume' and give it some thought. I wouldn't be able to start for a day or two since I just moved here and have to unpack. But I travel light."

Jamie shifted uneasily in her chair. "Why Beaumont, South Carolina?" she asked. "This town isn't exactly a booming metropolis. And the Gazette is rather small."

"I was sent here for a reason," Destiny said. "I'd never even heard of this place, but it came to me in a vision. So I used a small pendulum, and Beaumont came up on the map. I had to use a magnifying glass to see it, but now I'm sure I'm in the right place. Well, pretty sure."

Jamie simply nodded. She figured it was best to humor the woman until she could get rid of her.

Destiny smiled. "I know it's a lot to take in, but you can rest easy, my column will bring in many new readers."

"You know this for a fact?"

"Yep. I also have a very good feeling you're going to hire me. This interview is just a formality."

Jamie had no intention of hiring her. The last thing she needed was some kook working for her. "I'll have to think about it. I'll keep your resume on file in the meantime."

"I know you have doubts," Destiny went on as though she hadn't heard, "and I don't blame you. This newspaper is very important to you after what you've been through. You've struggled for so long to keep it going. I admire your tenacity, Jamie, but you have to stop comparing yourself to your grandfather."

Once again, Jamie felt the tiny hairs on her arm prickle. "What do you know about my grandfather?"

"He started this newspaper from nothing and did extremely well. He passed it on to your father when he died, but your father didn't fare so well. He never wanted to be a newspaperman to begin with."

"You're pretty good," Jamie said, "but this is a small town where everybody knows everybody's business. You'd only have to ask around to get your information." Even as she said it, she wondered how the woman had found out about the soap in her dresser drawer. She decided to humor her. "While you're at it, tell me this. There's this man in my life."

"Yeah, I know all about him. He sort of saved your behind when you had financial problems so he's a silent partner. You're afraid of falling in love with him, but I would advise you to follow your heart."

"How does he feel?" Jamie surprised herself by asking.

Destiny looked thoughtful. "He's hard to read. I sense his reluctance to make a commitment, but if you play your cards right, who knows?" Suddenly, she sneezed.

"Bless you," Jamie said.

Destiny's eyes watered, and she sneezed again. "You'll have to forgive me. This always happens when I start picking up on stuff. Do you have a tissue?"

"Don't you know?"

"Look, I can't be expected to know everything."

Jamie reached into her side drawer and pulled out a small box of tissues and handed it to her, just as Destiny let out another sneeze.

"I have to go before it gets worse." The woman stood and wiped her eyes. "Oh, by the way, I'm not going to charge you for my services. I've been married five times so I get plenty of alimony. This is just a hobby."

"Five husbands, huh?"

Another sneeze. "Yeah, and I'm not even forty years old. A girl has to work fast to rack up that many husbands in such a short period."

Jamie sat back and studied her. "Didn't you know the marriages were going to fail?"

Sniff, sniff, sneeze. "I was in love with them at the time, so what could I do? How about you call me when you're ready for me to start? My new number is on my resume." She made for the door, and then paused. "This man you're thinking about?"

Jamie remained silent.

"He's going to be back in your life very soon."

Jamie perked. "And?"

"Fireworks."

Jamie arched one brow. "Fireworks?"

Destiny smiled. "Fireworks."