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By *Beth Kery*

Wicked Burn
Daring Time
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Release
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Because You Are Mine

One Night of Passion series

*Addicted To You
*Bound To You (e-novella)
Captured By You (e-novella)
Exposed To You

**previously published under the pseudonym Bethany Kane*

Daring Time

BETH KERY



ETERNAL
ROMANCE

~ ONE ~

His partner Ramiro Menendez turned and stared at him, his mouth gaping open comically. Ryan suspected his own face shared the same expression of stunned incredulity. He felt like a wide-eyed kid in a candy store.

“You got an effing *ballroom* in your house.”

“Yeah. I noticed. Strange place for a cop to live, huh?” Ryan murmured as he studied the enormous room in the Prairie Avenue mansion. He’d just received the keys from his old professor and good friend Alistair Franklin this morning. When he’d told Ramiro as they left their west-side gym that he planned to stop by and take a look at his awesome, totally unexpected windfall that evening, Ramiro had said he wanted to join him.

Sunlight spilled from a row of four exquisite stained-glass windows, casting a landscape of rosy light and trellis-like shadows onto

the mahogany floors. For a brief moment, Ryan Daire perfectly envisioned what it must have been like: the crystal chandeliers alight with newly installed electricity, a fire leaping in the marble-encased fireplace, the ladies in their gowns and jewels, the men in their evening attire, the rich, acrid smell of fine cigars, the tinkling sound of champagne glasses being removed from a tray.

A woman wearing a blue satin gown with a black fur border stood by the grand piano. She glanced over a creamy shoulder and met his stare, her velvety dark eyes amazed and a little alarmed. She spun around, gifting him with the vision of full, satin-encased breasts contrasting with a waist so narrow he could have almost encircled it with his hands. A silver locket glittered on the flawless skin of her chest.

Ryan blinked the sunlight out of his eyes and the ballroom returned to its former barren state.

Christ. This old house must have really fired his imagination.

"I thought that old guy who gave it to you said it was fine if you sold it," Ramiro said as he walked over to the fireplace, slightly bent his tall frame and stood completely erect in the enormous hearth. He looked out at Ryan and laughed.

"He did, and I will sell it eventually. The heating bills alone would probably break me," Ryan mused as he glanced around appreciatively. The property description he'd received from Alistair's lawyer said the paneling, floors, staircases and wainscoting in the late-nineteenth-century mansion were all imported African mahogany. The stained-glass windows had been designed by Tiffany's greatest rival, John La Farge. Even Ramiro had been stunned into an uncustomary silence earlier when they'd gotten their first glimpse of the sweeping, majestic grand staircase.

Ryan couldn't help but feel a stab of pride at actually *owning* the stately old jewel. The regal bearing and elegance of the house spoke to something deep within him.

"Hey, you know what we should do? We should turn it into a gym," Ramiro suggested, pausing as he walked toward Ryan and, crouching into sparring position, gave a tight jab with his fist.

"Right. Put up a boxing ring and fill the ballroom with a bunch of sweaty, smelly guys. Maybe we could turn on the Tiffany chandeliers and hire a string quartet for matches."

Ramiro gave a sharp bark of laughter. Their loud footsteps on the wood floor echoed hollowly off the barren walls. Ryan wondered idly what the elegant ghosts of the past would think seeing he and Ramiro stalking along the corridors—a spic and a mick storming the grand entry hall like a couple of bulls in a china shop.

The sun had sunk below the horizon, leaving the old house draped in shadows so thick they seemed to have weight.

"It'd be amazing. Tons of guys would pay you for boxing lessons. Guys with real money, that is," Ramiro added pointedly. "You'd have to give up coaching kids for free."

"Not gonna happen," Ryan replied casually, used to Ramiro's doubts about the wisdom of volunteering his time to coach boxing to inner-city youth. Ramiro and he had been partners on the vice squad of the Chicago Police Department for the past four years and he'd trust Ramiro with his life—*had* trusted him with his life on several occasions. They were as close as brothers, but they didn't have much in common besides their fanaticism for their work.

"Yeah, I figured you'd say that. Who'd you say the guy was who gave you this house? Marshall Field or something?" Ramiro joked, referring to the nineteenth-century magnate who owned the famous Chicago department store.

"No, I think Marshall Field lived down the street a little bit. So did George Pullman and Philip Armour, from what I hear." He noticed Ramiro's blank expression despite the dimness in the entry hall. Ryan searched for a light switch. "Pullman was the creator of the Pullman sleeper train car and Philip Armour was the meatpacking

millionaire. You have him to thank, at least partially, for all those hot dogs you eat by the gross. Armour bragged about using everything on the pig 'but the squeal.' ”

Ryan recalled how he'd temporarily gone cold turkey as a teenager on any kind of packaged meats after reading about Philip Armour's revolutionary meatpacking techniques and the infamous Chicago stockyards.

Suddenly the opulent crystal chandelier blazed to life, bathing the grand foyer in soft, gleaming light. Ramiro glanced at him in surprise. Ryan hadn't yet located the light switch.

“Must be a short circuit. Who knows when this house was wired for electricity,” Ryan mumbled as they headed for the stairs.

“So you inherited a house on millionaire's row, in other words,” Ramiro said as he followed.

“I don't know if I'd call it that anymore, but the property it sits on is a hot ticket. The Prairie Avenue District is becoming revitalized.” Ryan switched on a light in the second-floor hallway, chasing encroaching shadows into the distance.

“This professor guy must have liked you a hell of a lot to leave you a mansion,” Ramiro muttered, a hint of envy flavoring his tone.

“I was knocked flat on my ass when Alistair told me what he planned, but there was nothing I could say to change his mind. He insisted I was doing him a favor by taking it. The value of the house is appreciating hugely because of the real estate development in this area. Alistair's lawyers advised him to reduce his taxable estate with a gift.”

“Some gift. Better he'd left you some cash, though.”

Ryan stepped into a room and flipped on a light. He studied the large, spacious bedroom suite, the plaster ceilings and intricately carved mantel. Alistair knew Ryan loved Chicago history. He must have guessed how much Ryan would appreciate the mansion.

“Cash's got *nothing* on this place.”

Ramiro snorted. “They broke the mold when it comes to you,

Daire. Six feet and four inches of pure pushover. At least to little kids and stray animals. Can't say the same about you when it comes to assholes like Jim Donahue.”

“You wouldn't want me any other way.”

“Who wants you? I'm shackled to you,” Ramiro grumbled.

They stepped into the bedroom. Ryan ran his hand admiringly over the carved mahogany mantel. Unlike the majority of the house, this room retained some furniture—stuff that looked to be the same vintage as the house, Ryan realized with a sense of amazement. The green-and-white floral wallpaper beneath the wainscoting had faded but still retained a fresh, feminine charm. Obviously the bedroom had once belonged to a woman.

The foot- and headboard of a brass bedstead leaned against the wall between two antique mahogany tables. Ryan fingered the cool metal thoughtfully. The brass needed to be cleaned but the bed was perfectly intact. An image of himself polishing the brass and putting together the bed for his own mattress flashed vividly into his mind's eye.

He'd be *nuts* to even consider moving into this place.

“Look at this. Looks like something you'd have your nose buried in.” Ramiro held up an old leather-bound book that he'd found in one of the table drawers. The color of the once-crimson leather had faded to a dull dark red.

“Shakespeare's sonnets,” Ryan murmured. He owned a copy of his own, nearly as well read as this old tome. Ryan had cultivated a love of Shakespeare from his father that had been nourished by Alistair. The book parted to a well-worn gold-leafed page when he opened it. He immediately recognized the 116th sonnet.

He raised the book toward his face and inhaled. His brow furrowed at the scent of gardenias mixing with the odor of leather and mildew.

“I'll bet you can get a couple grand for this old chest, Daire. People pay out their asses for antiques. Holy shit, check it out.”

Ramiro moved aside from the opened door of the massive mahogany wardrobe so that Ryan could see the full-length mirror attached on the inner side of the door. The frame had been carved into a meticulous iris design beneath the gilt. Time had taken its toll on the mirror itself. Six or so inches all along the exterior had gone foggy with age. Only the center portion reflected true. Still, the mirror was so huge that Ryan didn't have to stoop his tall frame to see his face in the reflection.

Only it wasn't his face that he saw. He started in surprise.

"Jesus."

He whipped around so fast that Ramiro jerked back in alarm.

"What?" Ramiro asked. The whites of his brown eyes showed as his gaze shifted warily around the room and then back to Ryan. "What's wrong, man?"

Ryan turned back to the mirror, this time seeing his own bloodless face and greenish-blue eyes staring back at him.

"You didn't see her?"

"See *who*?"

"That woman. She was just right here, standing in front of me. I saw her in the mirror." He quickly inspected the empty wardrobe, scanned the bedroom and rushed to the door.

The hallway stood empty and silent, the dozens of closed doors along both walls reminding him of watchful eyes.

"There's no one here but us, Daire," Ramiro said from just behind him.

Ryan shook his head. He *knew* what he'd seen with his own two eyes: a stunning, lithesome-limbed beauty with pale, flawless skin and a long mane of soft, curling dark hair hanging loose down her shoulders and back.

The same woman he'd imagined briefly in the ballroom, he realized. But this had been different. In the ballroom it had just been like a super-vivid flash of his imagination. This had been real.

Realer than real.

Laughter had curved her lush, dark pink lips. She'd worn a sheer negligee, the bottom of which barely covered the dark nest of hair between her slender thighs. She might as well have been standing there naked for as much good as the nightgown did. The only other thing that adorned her flawless skin was a locket hanging around her neck. Ryan could still see perfectly with his mind's eye the detail of the filigree carved into the silver and the throb of the woman's pulse at her throat.

"No. I definitely saw her," Ryan insisted firmly, but even as he said it, he began to question himself. He'd seen the front of her in the mirror . . . as though she'd stood directly before him with her back to him.

His breath froze on an inhale.

There hadn't been anyone standing in front of him. She'd *just* been in the mirror, staring out at him as if the space between the gilded frame had been a doorway, not a pane of glass. He crossed the room and touched the surface of the mirror. Despite the bizarreness of what had just happened, he didn't really believe he'd feel anything but the cool, smooth surface of the glass.

Shock jolted through him for the second time that evening when the molecules of his fingers seemed to meld with those of the mirror. He wondered if it hadn't been his imagination when a second later he pressed his fingertips against a solid pane of glass.

"You really didn't see anyone?" he asked Ramiro as he turned around.

Ramiro shook his head.

There was no way in *hell* Ryan wouldn't have noticed the back of that woman if she stood in front of him. That flimsy excuse for a nightgown wouldn't have completely covered her bare ass.

Uh-uh—not a possibility. As a healthy, red-blooded male, Ryan knew for a fact he would have noticed *that*.

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"Dios, Daire. I think you saw a ghost."

Ryan shot Ramiro an annoyed look. "I didn't see a ghost. She was perfectly solid."

Perfectly gorgeous.

He recalled the startled expression in her velvety black eyes. "She looked as surprised to see me as I did her," Ryan said.

"What'd she look like?"

A pair of full, shapely breasts and succulent, fat nipples pressing against transparent cloth that did nothing to hide their rosy hue flashed into Ryan's mind's eye. The potent eroticism of the recalled image made his cock jerk in his boxer briefs.

What'd she look like? *Edible. Delicious. Like an angel on a mission of sin.*

"Dark hair. Dark eyes," he muttered. For some reason he felt hesitant about sharing even a basic description of the woman with Ramiro.

"You saw a ghost all right. This house is haunted," Ramiro declared as he glanced around, his feet shifting nervously.

Ryan couldn't help but grin. "I thought you were a big, bad vice detective. Since when are you scared of a little tiny female?"

Ramiro gave him an insulted look. "Ever since the 'little tiny female' is dead."

"She's *not* dead."

Ramiro looked a little taken aback by Ryan's hard tone. "Whatever, man." Ramiro shivered and started toward the door. The image of his brawny partner shuddering reflexively struck Ryan as markedly odd, not to mention alarming for some reason.

"The only time I saw you get so pale was when you got shot," Ramiro said. "Take my advice and sell this place quick as you can. I'll take the likes of a slimy rat like Anton Chirnovsky any day versus a haunted house. Come on. Crenshaw will be waiting for us at Bureau Headquarters. We're making sure Chirnovsky has his story

straight and is in good voice before we strap the wires on him for Donahue's downfall this weekend."

Ryan closed the heavy wardrobe door with a brisk bang, perhaps hoping to shatter the fey spell wrought by the vision of the stunning woman. He didn't believe in ghosts and he was every bit as eager to nail Jim Donahue for human trafficking as Ramiro was.

Still, he lingered in the doorway, casting his gaze around the empty bedroom warily before he shut out the light.



Anton Chirnovsky seemed to sense Ryan's stare when he exited the conference room. His pale blue eyes met Ryan's and then shifted away nervously. The FBI agent in charge of guarding him while he colluded with the police and FBI to have his boss Jim Donahue arrested tapped his elbow. Chirnovsky willingly headed down the hallway away from Ryan.

"Rat bastard. Guy's as much of a scum as Donahue," Ramiro muttered bitterly under his breath.

"Uh-uh. Donahue's worse," Ryan stated flatly, his tone not inviting one of Ramiro's typical glib responses.

They'd been working on the case against Jim Donahue for a year now, ever since Ramiro and he had followed a tip in regard to a supposed brothel operating in an upscale high-rise on the Gold Coast. They'd instead uncovered a white slavery operation; eight young women being held against their will and forced into performing acts of sex with strangers in exchange for food and freedom from heinous brutalization, never seeing a cent of the money that changed hands. They'd been primarily from Mexico, but several had come from eastern European countries after being promised jobs as waitresses and bartenders, but instead being taken captive and filtered to the United States across the porous Mexican-American border.

Jim Donahue was perfectly poised to mastermind a human trafficking operation that extended way beyond those eight girls. As the owner of Donahue Landscaping, Donahue received approximately forty million dollars a year in contracts from the city of Chicago for street and park landscaping. Donahue cut costs by regularly importing illegal immigrants for cheap labor. He was a slick operator, though, and decided to put his network of illegal immigration contacts to more profitable use. It wasn't too far of a leap for him to expand from illegal transportation of aliens to the sex-slave trade.

The bureau had become involved after their discovery on the Gold Coast, but Ryan and Ramiro had been assigned to an FBI-CPD combined task force created specifically to stamp out human trafficking in Chicago and the northern Illinois area.

"Daire, wait up!"

He and Ramiro paused on Roosevelt Road on the way to Ryan's car while Dale Crenshaw, the special agent in charge of the human trafficking task force, caught up to them.

"What do you think?" Crenshaw asked.

"Chirnovsky will play. He's scared shitless Daire'll turn his pretty-boy face to hamburger meat if he doesn't. It's amazing the cred you get for being the Amateur International boxing champion for three years running," Ramiro bragged as if he'd been talking about his own titles instead of Ryan's. He had a habit of compensating for Ryan's extended silences and terse explanations in a manner that didn't even remotely resemble anything Ryan would say.

"I didn't hear that," Crenshaw said resolutely, his thin lips twitching with amusement. In the past year of working with him, Ryan had found the older man to be fair-minded and relatively easy to work for, especially considering the problems Ryan'd encountered on multidisciplinary task forces in the past.

"Got your tuxes all brushed off and ready to go?" Crenshaw asked, referring to the undercover sting operation to nail Donahue over the weekend. Donahue was expecting to meet with Chirnovsky

at a black-tie charity event sponsored by the City League at the Field Museum to discuss future importation plans for women to Milwaukee, St. Louis and Kansas City.

"Yeah, but I'll still be staying background. Donahue and I have met. Took an instant disliking to each other," Ryan said as they walked down the sidewalk.

Crenshaw paused, an anxious look on his thin face. "*What?* You never mentioned that."

Ryan just shrugged and kept walking, but Ramiro spoke for him yet again.

"He met him years ago through his father. Daire's dad was a hotshot lawyer, did legal work for the city and county. You can imagine how disappointed he was when his precious only son joined the ranks of the common soldier."

Ryan shot Ramiro an annoyed look. Ramiro's eyebrows went up and Ryan knew that he'd gotten the message to shut up. For the most part, Ryan was as used to his partner's garrulousness as Ramiro was accustomed to Ryan's extended silences, but occasionally Ramiro went too far. Ramiro knew perfectly well that Ryan's father had eventually become proud of his son's work on the CPD despite his early misgivings about Ryan's choice to drop out of law school and become a cop.

For the past year or so Ryan had been having some doubts about the career decision he'd made ten years ago, though, and maybe that's what made him extra testy about Ramiro's off-the-cuff comment. Ryan wanted to make a tangible difference. That's why he volunteered his time to coach boxing to inner-city youth and chose to fight crime and human greed as a cop instead of a lawyer.

Sometimes he wondered if it was enough, though.

"Don't worry. I only met Donahue once years ago. I doubt he even remembers it, but I'll stay background, anyway. I wouldn't let anything get in the way of nailing Donahue's hide," Ryan told Crenshaw.