



SADIRA STONE



She's a free spirit. He's a one-woman man.

"Tell you what," he said. "How about if we have drinks and talk about anything but the competition?"

"Because...why?"

"You're a real hard-ass, aren't you?" He rolled his eyes. "Because I like you, Margot."

"Why?"

He leaned so close their foreheads almost touched, a challenge simmering in his smile. "Have a drink with me and find out."

If there was one thing she couldn't resist, it was a challenge. On the other hand, he might not like her so much if he knew about Darcy. Let that be the test, then. Let him prove he wasn't one of those possessive, controlling guys Darcy warned her about.

"Okay. I will." She stepped back. "But you should know, I'm sort of seeing someone."

His thick auburn brows contracted. "Sort of?"

"A woman."

His nostrils flared on a deep inhalation, but he held her gaze. "Is it serious?"

"Not really." Might as well serve up the truth, raw and ungarnished. Might as well be honest with herself too. "She lives in Berkeley. I only see her every month or two."

Holding her gaze, he nodded. "Okay then. Thanks for telling me." The tense lines of his mouth relaxed into a casual grin. "So, drinks?"

Well I'll be damned.

PRAISE FOR AUTHOR

Sadira Stone

THROUGH THE RED DOOR

“...a beautiful love story filled with wonderful characters and if you like your romance hot, hot, hot look no further. It is a story about being able to begin anew and still love the one you lost.”

*~Linda Tonis, RWA Paranormal
Romance Review Team*

~*~

“The erotic scenes in this book were off the charts...a rich mix of love, sex, and thoughtful introspection.”

~Peggy Jaeger, Author of Christmas and Cannolis

~*~

RUNAWAY LOVE STORY

“Stone’s use of everyday situations like putting a loved one in a nursing home brings a deep humanity to this novel that is usually lacking in romance, especially one this hot!”

*~Suanne Schafer, Author, Bookbub,
Goodreads and Amazon*

Love, Art, and Other Obstacles

The Book Nirvana Series
Book Three

by

Sadira Stone

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

Love, Art, and Other Obstacles

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Dedication

As always, thanks to Duncan, my HEA,
for his infinite patience.

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Chapter One

The familiar bookshop door weighed a thousand pounds today. Margot DuPont yanked it open and stomped to the counter where her coworker Laurel and Laurel's great aunt Maxie huddled, giggling over a volume of erotic photos.

"There's my precious girl." Maxie spread her skinny arms and enveloped Margot in a tight hug, clomping her right between the shoulder blades with her bedazzled cane.

"Oof." Margot squirmed in her surrogate grandmother's bony embrace.

Like a startled turtle, Maxie drew back her head and squinted. "You took out all your face jewelry."

Margot touched the bare spot where her eyebrow ring usually twinkled. Felt weird going out without it and her rows of tiny ear hoops, as if she'd forgotten part of her face. "I wanted to look more, you know, professional."

Maxie snorted. "Professionally boring? You gain nothing by hiding your light under a bushel, kiddo. So, how'd the interview go?"

"It was, uh, weird." She peeled off the plum velveteen blazer she'd borrowed from Maxie, then loosened the neck bow on her satin blouse. She'd been aiming for the polished, professional look her digital arts professor recommended, even going so

far as to strip the magenta tips from her spiky blond hair—a bit hypocritical, but she was itching to change the color anyway.

“Weird how?” Laurel asked.

“Well, my instructor set it up. Supposed to be just an informational interview with a senior graphic designer. You know, learn about her job responsibilities, her favorite projects, blah, blah, blah. But when I get there, the woman starts quizzing me.” She scrubbed her fingers through her short hair until it stood on end in her usual punk-fairy look. “Next thing I know, she’s offering me a job.”

“Doing what?”

Margot snorted. “Designing a sticker for the recycling bins. You know, to show people what they can and can’t recycle.”

Laurel shrugged. “What’s wrong with that?”

Just—everything. In her classes at the U of O, she designed magazine layouts, colorful posters, whimsical logos. She got to showcase her wit and artistic talent. How could she do that with a sticker?

“I just expected something more—interesting, I guess.” She hung up her jacket and slid her employee apron over her head.

Laurel wrapped a long, gangly arm around her shoulder. “It takes a while to work your way up the ladder. When I first started working at galleries, they had me cleaning toilets and sorting picture hangers. And I’m sure as hell not burning up the art world volunteering at the Rainbow Arts Center.”

Margot cleared her throat to disguise the wobble in her voice. “Yeah, but that senior designer

says it'll be at least five years before I get to do anything really creative."

In preparation for this interview, she'd memorized the career mission statement she wrote for her Arts and Industry class. *I want to beautify the community and grab people's attention with powerful images to help social causes like fighting discrimination and empowering youth from disadvantaged backgrounds.*

Stupid. No one outside the college cared about her goals. And then, a rotten cherry on top of the sludge sundae: on the elevator ride back down, another designer hit on her. The startled look on his face when she told him about her girlfriend? Priceless.

It bothered her not one tiny bit to lie to the guy. The occasional booty call with Darcy hardly counted as a relationship. But she had no time for more. This last semester of college was kicking her ass. And while she loved working at Book Nirvana, she'd been so looking forward to launching her graphic arts career. Today's interview had deflated her naïve dreams.

"Hey, Margot, back from the interview trenches?" Harry, their white-haired coworker, strode through the archway connecting the bookshop to the café next door, carrying their mid-afternoon coffee fix. "Perfect timing." He set the tray on the counter and handed out the goodies. "For Clara, decaf latte, extra foam." He glanced around. "Where's the boss?"

"At the post office. I'll put it on her desk." Laurel took the cup and disappeared behind the

carved wooden screen concealing Clara's workspace.

Harry continued playing waiter. "Earl Gray tea for Miss Maxie, black coffee for Laurel, and, for Margot, a cinnamon frappe." The smile lines deepened around his twinkling blue eyes. "That's not coffee, that's a milkshake."

He squeezed the liquid from his tea bag before dropping it into the waste basket. "Enjoy it while you can, Margot. When you get to my age, you'll have to watch your calories."

Maxie cackled. "Calories, shmalories. I'm ninety. I'll eat what I want."

Laurel returned and slid the book of sexy photos across the counter. "We got a shipment for the red room. Wanna shelve them?"

A visit to the shop's famous erotica collection was the last thing she needed—too sharp a reminder of her pathetic love life. She opened her mouth to demur, but Maxie snatched up the book. "Come on, kiddo. I'll help you." Leaving her tea on the counter, she shuffled toward the lacquered red door at the rear of the shop. Lulu, the shop cat, trotted along, her fluffy ginger tail waving.

Since Laurel came to work at the shop, Maxie visited so often it was like having an extra coworker. Might as well get her one of those Book Nirvana aprons all the employees wore.

With a shrug of defeat, Margot leaned across the counter, snagged the key, then followed, pushing the rolling cart. She unlocked the door and tugged the silk tassel on the pull cord, flooding the little chamber with soft pink light from the antique

ceiling lamp. The sheer beauty of the room settled around her like a luxurious silk shawl. On three sides, ceiling-high shelves held volumes of sexy art, bawdy stories, and erotic history. A faded Persian rug in rosy tones and an S-shaped antique conversation settee completed the picture-perfect setting for the jewel in Book Nirvana's crown.

Nick, Clara's new husband, was an anthropology professor specializing in cross-cultural sexual something-or-other, AKA horny people throughout the ages. Since he hooked up with Clara, new erotica books arrived regularly. Lucky Clara.

Lulu hopped onto one side of the velvet loveseat. Maxie settled onto the other. "So, let's see what we've got here." She pulled a book from the rolling cart, flipped through the pages, then handed it over. "Something for you, kiddo."

Margot ran her fingers over the pebbly leather cover, worn smooth with much handling. "*Sappho's Garden*," she read aloud. Inside, dense columns of scholarly text, interspersed with gorgeous, full-color prints. "Allegory of Peace and Justice, by Theodoor van Thulden." She snorted. These plump Baroque beauties might represent abstract qualities, but with their languid embrace, their sensual, knowing gaze, their lazy smiles, it seemed they'd just rolled out of bed after a mighty good time. Justice hadn't even finished dressing.

Maxie nudged her with a pointy elbow. "How's that girlfriend of yours?"

She turned away to shelve the book, and to hide her eye-roll. "Same. Still in Berkeley."

“Too bad you don’t go for boys. Lots of nice single fellas around. Artists, like you.”

She loved Maxie like—no, more than—her own grandmother. But damn, the woman was nosy. “I go for boys sometimes.” With a sigh, she lifted the next book, a collection of erotic photography. She flipped the pages, stopping at a two-page spread. A pile of sleeping bodies, some male, some female, some androgynous, all beautiful with naked skin gleaming, the best bits hidden behind glossy leaves of philodendron, palm, and fern, like a crumbling temple swallowed by a jungle.

A tingle between her legs reminded her of how long it had been since Darcy’s last visit.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” Maxie rummaged in the pocket of her yellow satin overalls. “Got something for you.” She pressed an envelope into Margot’s hand. “Friend of mine’s holding a meeting. You should go.”

The flyer inside read,

First Annual

Rising Wind Grant for Emerging Visual Artists

Informational Meeting

Monday, October 8

Rising Wind Studios

With a weary sigh, she refolded the paper. “C’mon Max. You know this isn’t meant for me.”

A stubborn glint lit Maxie’s watery blue-gray eyes. “And why not?”

“These contests are meant for painters, sculptors. You know, fine arts.” Her fingers hooked in snarky air quotes around the last two words. “No one’s gonna give me an art grant, no matter how

creative my work is.”

“Codswallop!” Maxie thumped Margot’s foot with the rubber tip of her cane. “Quit putting yourself down. I’ve seen your work. Posters, comics, fancy-schmancy websites. It’s pretty and interesting and it makes you think. That’s art.”

She opened her mouth to protest, but Maxie cut her off with another jab. “Don’t put yourself in a box, kiddo.” Sidling closer, she lowered her voice, even though they were alone in the little room. “Besides, I know the woman running the competition. Told her I’d help round up some young artists. And you owe me.”

That was damn sure true. Honorary grandma to an extended family of local artists, Maxie had hooked Margot up with much-needed side gigs to supplement her income from the bookstore. When her shared apartment got too crowded and chaotic, Margot was always welcome at Maxie’s colorful cottage in the Whiteaker District. Maxie’s huge collection of weird art supplies provided inspiration and raw materials, and her sharp-eyed feedback elevated Margot’s graphics work from just competent to striking and impactful.

She raised her hands in surrender. “Okay, I’ll be there.”

“And don’t forget Saturday morning.”

“Saturday?”

“The Rainbow Arts Center.”

Crap, she’d forgotten. A few months back, she helped Laurel create a poster for this Saturday’s charity road race and art show. Ever since, Maxie had been bugging her to check out the youth arts

program where she and Laurel volunteered. But between her heavy class load, shifts at the bookstore, and side gigs to cover expenses, she barely had time to breathe.

Maxie patted her arm. "I wish you'd come spend some time with those kids. Some of them remind me a lot of you. That art program's like family for them."

"Family?" Margot snorted. "Max, if you're trying to sell me on volunteering, you'd better pick another approach. Family's the last thing I need."

"There's more than one kind of family, you know." With a soft grunt, Maxie pushed to her feet. "Saturday, ten o'clock. Just give me an hour. If you don't like it, I won't bring it up again."

For Maxie's sake, she could carve out an hour. "Okay, okay. I'll be there."

"You're late, Byrne," Brenda growled from behind the taproom's counter.

"Sorry, boss. Won't happen again." Elmer pulled a small bubble-wrapped object from his jacket pocket and set it on the bar. "Made you something."

"Don't try and bribe your way out of this." She twirled her damp bar towel into a whip and flicked his arm. "If you weren't so popular with the customers, I'd a canned your ass years ago."

He rubbed his stinging arm. "Damn, that hurts."

"So does having to do the grunt work myself. You know I'm too old for that shit." She flipped a long gray dreadlock over her shoulder. "Three

pallets to unload before lunch, and a nasty spill in the cooler.”

Stifling the urge to grumble, he pasted on a wide smile and slid the package toward her. “Aren’t you gonna open it?”

“Don’t bat those pretty eyelashes at me, Ginger Boy.” But the corners of her mouth twitched upward as she peeled off the tape and unwrapped the package. She held the little bowl up to the light. “Well now, that’s real nice. What’s this, a soap dish?”

He shrugged. “If you like, or a place to keep your keys and spare change.”

“Nice job on the feathers. How’d you get the black glaze to sparkle?”

He stroked his beard and grinned. Nothing pleased him more than a project that turned out just the way he’d envisioned. Well, maybe one thing pleased him more, but that wouldn’t pay his bills. Ceramics would.

“Top secret,” he replied with a waggle of his eyebrows. “If I tell, the potter assassins will hunt me down and kill me.” Actually, the glaze came in a jar, sparkle and all. But why not take credit when it’s offered? “If you like the raven feather design, maybe we could make a line of mugs. You know, for special brews.” So far, she’d ignored his hints about raven-themed ceramic mugs for Raven’s Gulch Brewery, but giving up wasn’t his style.

She clapped him on the shoulder. “If I win the lottery, I’ll place my order. Meanwhile, the cooler.”

Grumbling under his breath, he pulled his apron from its brass hook behind the counter, then

fetches a mop.

Despite her cranky act, Brenda was usually pretty cool about his less-than-compulsive relationship with punctuality. But on Fridays, when she paid the bills, there was no talking to her. Best to keep his head down and stay out of her way.

In an hour the lunch crowd would descend, filling the uncomfortable metal stools with hungry, thirsty bodies. After swabbing the cooler, he checked the chalkboard. Same lunch specials as yesterday. He poked his head into the kitchen. “Hey, Iver, no one fixed the menu?”

“Shit. Where’s Katrina?” The head cook wiped tomato sauce from his hands and hollered, “Trina, fix the damn chalkboard.”

A husky voice answered from the pantry, “You told me to get the damn onions. Make up your mind, fer fuck’s sake.”

“Can you do it, bro?” Iver made goo-goo eyes at him. “You’re an artist and all. Just erase Deconstructed Reuben and write in Wild Boar Meatball Sub.”

Elmer sighed. “Sure. What’s the soup?”

“Wild mushroom with freekeh.”

“Freaky mushrooms. Got it.” He snagged the box of colored chalk and climbed the ladder behind the bar. After changing the daily specials, he added illustrations: a bristly wild boar beside the sandwich special, and a pair of grinning, spotted mushrooms beside the soup du jour.

“El, why are you wasting your talents here?” Brenda squinted up at him, her scrunched expression somewhere between puzzled and

annoyed.

“Little thing called a paycheck, boss lady.” He grinned. “And the pleasure of your company.”

She harrumphed, but her scowl softened. “You know I’m immune to your charms. Now go unload those pallets.”

He went. Hopefully, his charm and chalkboard skills were enough to keep him on the payroll. Thanks to Brenda’s secret gooey center, the brewery was overstaffed. Sooner or later, the axe would fall. Judging by her cranky demeanor, probably sooner.

Just before the lunch crowd arrived, his phone dinged. He ducked out back to check his messages.

Janice, his potter guru. He tapped the Call Back button.

“Hey, Queen Jan. Can I schedule the kiln for my next batch? I’ve got a dozen tankards ready for bisque firing.”

“Yeah, about that.” Janice’s voice rang flat.

A cold, clammy hand gripped his guts. “Please, not again.”

“Sorry, hon. Kiln’s on the fritz. Repair guy’s on vacation in Jamaica.” Her sigh vibrated the phone’s speaker. “Honestly, I don’t know if it can be revived. John and I’ve been talking. It might be time to close up the shop, finally start the retirement we’ve dreamt about for so long.”

He spluttered and waved his free hand. “But you, but I...shit, Jan. I got a table at that big art show in Portland next month. I can’t sell unfired mugs.”

“Clay Mountain Studio’s got two kilns.”

“They charge twice what you do. And their waiting list is a mile long. The show’s in—” He counted on his fingertips. “Like, three weeks.”

“Elmer, you’re moving into the professional realm. Most of our customers are just hobbyists. Time to get your own studio space.”

He scrubbed his fingers through his short, wavy hair. “No way I can afford that. I’m barely covering art supplies and rent. It’s just...arrgh.”

“You’ll find a way.” A hint of warmth crept back into her voice. “You’re smart and resourceful. Ask around. Someone will have an opening for you.”

He bit his lip until the sting cut through his frustrated funk. “You’re right. You and John have been great to me. You deserve to enjoy your retirement. I’ll figure something out.”

“That’s my boy. Turn on that charm of yours. Nothing like a handsome, muscly redhead to warm the cockles of a woman’s heart.”

He barked a humorless laugh. “Thanks for the compliment, but you’re the only female studio owner in town. I’m not so good at flirting with guys. And what if they expect me to follow through?”

After signing off, he pocketed his phone and pondered his options. Maybe trade more volunteer hours for the use of the Rainbow Arts Center’s kiln? Teaching those kids was fun, but working there ate into his available hours at the brewery, his only paying job besides selling his pottery at art fairs. And—no kiln, no pottery, nothing to sell. Back to square one. *Shit.*

Maxie. He slapped his thigh and grinned. Maxie would have an idea. She had more connections in the Eugene, Oregon art scene than anyone.

“Oh, dear heart, this is beautiful!” Maxie’s ropy hands trembled as she turned the mug over and over, examining it from every angle. “How do you make these leaves look so delicate?”

“I just think about you, Max. Tiny, powerful, and beautiful.” He smooched her wrinkled cheek. “You smell good too.”

“Pish-tosh.” She batted him away like a pesky fly. “Sit down. I’ll make tea. My neighbor dropped off a plate of banana bran muffins.” She pushed up from the sofa and headed for the tiny kitchenette, her marabou slippers shuffling on the carpet.

He shoved aside a mountain of embroidered pillows and settled onto the lumpy couch. “The place is looking pretty homey.” He’d recently helped Maxie move from her cottage in the Whiteaker District to this tiny apartment in a seniors’ complex. But it was hard to stuff such a big personality into such a little box—especially when that big personality came with piles of framed artwork, furniture, rugs, wall hangings, statuary...

“Thanks to you and your friends,” she called. “Too bad you didn’t come by this morning. Margot was here. Darling girl. Artistic, like you.” She poked her head through the doorway, bright eyes twinkling. “Feisty, like me.”

“Who’s Margot, again?”

She returned with the ceramic teapot he’d made

her for Christmas last year, now steaming with something that smelled more like swamp water than tea. “Tiny girl, works with Laurel at the bookshop. You’ve met her. Spiky blond hair, pierced eyebrows, tattoos.”

Ahh, Margot. He’d noticed the sassy little sprite flitting around Book Nirvana. At the time, he’d been more focused on Maxie’s grandniece, a tall, cool blonde who’d recently moved to Eugene. But nothing came of that—she hooked up with a tall, gangly, bald dude. No accounting for taste. “Yeah, she’s cute. Isn’t her hair pink?”

Maxie shrugged and pulled the plastic wrap from a plate, revealing misshapen lumps in fluted paper cups.

He squinted. “Maxie, are these muffins supposed to be green?”

“Spirulina,” she intoned, lifting one to her lips. “Mmm. So good for you.”

“That’s algae, right?” He took a tentative nibble. Banana-scented sawdust.

“Eat up, darling. You need fuel for those pretty muscles. So, what’s new? You looking forward to that big show in Portland?”

He told her about Janice’s broken kiln and plans to retire. “Got any tips for me, Maxie? If I can’t get those mugs fired soon, I’ll have to give up my table at the show, and it took me three years to get an invitation.”

“What about the Rainbow Center?”

“Their kiln’s pretty small. And pretty old.” In fact, he half expected it to croak each time he fired it up. “Besides, most of the time it’s filled with the

kids' projects."

"Hmm." She sipped her tea. "There's the...no, they closed. How about...drat. She moved to Bend. I don't suppose you could drive that far?"

"Are you kidding? My truck barely makes it to work."

"Let me make some calls." She crumpled her paper muffin cup, then pointed her crooked finger at his chest. "You need a loan to buy your own kiln?"

He nearly choked on his tea. "No way, Max. I can't take your money."

"Why not? That's what it's for—to help friends. And family." She laid her hand over his. "You've been very good to me."

He shook his head. "Takes a lot more than a kiln to make a pottery studio. You need space, supplies, wheels, drying racks, a 220 outlet. The electric bill would be huge. And there's all kinds of safety regulations. My landlord would flip."

With an ache in his middle that came more from worry than from the pond-scum muffin, he pushed to his feet. "Thanks for the snack, Max. I'll talk to you soon. Let me know if you hear anything that could help."

"Will do, handsome. Here, let me brush those crumbs from your beard."

He held still while she groomed him like an affectionate little orangutan. What a pair they made, her with her sparse, downy hair dyed flaming red, him with his copper thatch. Anyone would've thought they were blood relations rather than chosen family. The truth—his chosen family beat out his blood family any day. Especially Maxie. No

one related to him by blood would ever lift a finger to help. But if there was an affordable studio space anywhere in Eugene, Maxie would find it.

“Oh, I almost forgot.” She shuffled to the counter and dug through her giant bucket of a purse. “This might help.” She handed him an envelope.

“Hey now, I said no money.”

“Not money, a meeting. Friend of mine’s starting an annual artist grant. Maybe you could win enough to rent a studio of your own.”

He ripped it open and read the flyer. “Emerging visual artists? Sounds like painters, not potters.”

“Give it a try. Agatha’s an open-minded sort. What’ve you got to lose?”

She had a point. Might as well attend the meeting. If nothing else, he could pick a few brains. Maybe someone could point him toward an affordable studio.

Chapter Two

Margot crammed the last of the new anime books onto the shelf. “All done, Clara. What’s next?”

Behind the counter, her boss slit open a carton of books. “These are for the red room. A friend of Nick’s is thinning his collection.” She tucked a stray auburn lock behind her ear, lifted a volume, and read the title aloud. “*De Figuris Veneris: A Manual of Classical Erotica*.” She flipped through a few pages, then whistled and fanned herself. “My word, these pregnancy hormones are heating my hoo-hah. You’d better shelve these.” She shut the book with a bang and grinned. “Funny, my pregnant friends never mentioned this benefit.”

“I’ll bet Nick’s glad about that.”

“Oh, he’s definitely reaping the benefits.” Clara waggled her eyebrows and patted her slightly rounded tum.

With Lulu leading the way, Margot rolled the book-laden cart to the red door, unlocked it, and stepped inside. Lifting the first book, she settled onto the velvet seat and stroked Lulu’s fluffy fur while flipping through the illustrations that got Clara so stirred up. Soft-focus drawings of graceful men and women wearing only strappy sandals and headbands in the style of Ancient Greece, reclining

on beds and sofas and cushions and boulders as they pleased each other. She turned the page, and her breath caught. A young man stretched out on his back, one hand limp, the other resting on the hip of a woman who straddled him reverse-cowgirl style. Their heavy-lidded expressions echoed on the face of a second woman standing nearby, watching—awaiting her turn?

A rap on the door jolted her. “Margot?” Laurel peeped through. “Maxie’s asking for you.”

“Oh, I, uh...” Heat flashed over her cheeks. She snapped the book shut. “Just let me finish shelving these. Be right there.”

She grumbled to herself as she slid the books into place, “Stupid to be embarrassed. No one’s judging you. Maxie visits this room all the time. Laurel banged her boyfriend in here, for fuck’s sake. Clara said their baby was probably conceived in here.” Still, being interrupted while spinning steamy fantasies felt like being caught with her pants down.

Finished with her task, she pushed the cart behind the counter, then glanced around for Maxie. A rusty cackle rang out from the art and fashion aisle, echoed by a deep, rumbling chuckle.

“Maxie?” She rounded the corner.

Leaning on her blinged-out cane, Maxie pointed at the top shelf.

“This one?” A young, red-haired guy reached up for a volume of vintage fashion photos. His profile was—wow. Superhero thighs in stained jeans, firm ass, tight belly, broad chest, and heavily inked arms.

That fuzzy, flame-colored beard of his must tickle. What would it feel like brushing against her breasts, over her belly, between her thighs?

She bit her lip hard. *Too much time in the red room.*

The guy turned toward her and grinned. Was it just her imagination, or did his eyes flash when they met hers? Warm hazel eyes, thickly lashed and sparkling with playful energy.

A happy little vibration rose from her belly and twitched the corners of her mouth upward—until she recognized him.

Oh, yuck. This guy. She'd seen him hanging around the shop, flirting with Laurel, all swaggering, macho bullshit. She remembered how Doug, Laurel's boyfriend, had tensed like an angry stork and glared at the shorter, buffer man.

Maxie waved. "Margot, you remember Elmer? He gave me a ride." She nudged him with her bony elbow. "Isn't he cute?"

Real cute. And he knows it.

"How's it going, Margot?" His grin widened as his gaze flicked down her body and back up.

Creep.

No way to avoid his extended hand without offending Maxie, so she took it. Warm, calloused, his grip firm but not too tight. A tattoo of a foaming beer mug adorned the back of his hand. Beneath the copper hair on his forearm, pretty muscles flexed.

Feet on the ground, DuPont. You've got no time for flirtatious fuzz-beards.

Maxie's merry gaze flicked from Elmer to Margot. "He's exhibiting at the Rainbow Center on

Saturday.” She grinned up at Elmer. “Margot helped Laurel design that poster for the art show.”

His eyebrows rose. “That’s your work? Really nice.”

She shook her head. “It’s Laurel’s work. I just helped her with the graphic design software.”

“Graphic design? Like ads and words and stuff?”

She curled her lip and prepared for battle with yet another snooty artist who looked down his precious nose at graphic arts, like nothing with words or photos could ever count as real art. “I make stuff everyone sees, not just rich people in art galleries.” She stepped closer, glaring up into his startled face while she ticked off on her fingers. “Posters for community events, book covers, the logo for this shop, and its website and signage and—”

He raised both hands and backed off a few steps. “Relax, angry elf. I wasn’t putting down your work, okay? I said I liked the poster. Jeesh.”

Maxie’s painted-on auburn brows rumbled. “Margot, I’m surprised at you.”

That stung. She lowered her gaze and shuffled her boots. “Yeah, well, I’m sick of snobby artists.”

He crossed athletic arms over his impressive pecs. “I’m not one of them.”

Her cheeks flushed hot. “Okay, cool. Sorry. So, um, what are you exhibiting at the show?”

“Ceramics. Beer steins, mostly. Donated a dozen to the Rainbow Arts Center.” He winked, her dig seemingly forgotten. “If someone likes my stuff, maybe they’ll order a complete set.”

Beer mugs. Definitely not snooty.
Embarrassment drilled deeper into her skull.

The pretty potter smooched Maxie's cheek.
"Well, gotta shove off. Max, I'll pick you up at ten on Saturday. Ladies." He pantomimed lifting a hat brim, then ambled toward the door.

Maxie prodded Margot's boot with her cane.
"Why'd you bite his head off? He's a nice boy. You should ask him out."

She rolled her eyes. "Max, I'm not looking to date right now. Especially not that guy."

"What's wrong with Elmer?"

"I've seen him in action. He flirts for sport. I'm not gonna be anyone's plaything."

The doorway bell tinkled as Elmer strolled through. Laurel looked up from wiping the counter.
"You want to wait in the café, Aunt Maxie? I'll be done in fifteen minutes."

"Of course, doll." Maxie tottered toward the coffee shop next door.

Margot moved behind the counter and watched through the plate-glass window as Elmer crossed the street and unlocked his rust-bucket pickup.
"Pain in the ass, isn't he?" *Nice ass, though. Firm and crunchy.*

Laurel chuckled. "Oh, he's not so bad. I think he just flirts out of habit, like some people nibble their nails or twiddle their hair." She turned away to straighten a pile of flyers. "Margot, do you—um..."

"What?"

"Do you date guys?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Sometimes. Why?"

"On his way out, he asked about you."

“Oh, so I should date him, get him off your back?” She scrubbed her fingers through her hair. “No thanks.”

“Well, I hope you’ll come to the art show anyway. I’m running the race at ten, but I’ll help with the set-up beforehand.” She cracked a crooked smile. “I’ll do my best to corral Elmer. Gotta warn you, though—if he sets his mind on you, he’s persistent.”

“Don’t worry.” She shoved a hand through her spiky hair. “I can handle pushy guys. I know how to push back.”

“Prickly little shrew,” Elmer grumbled as he adjusted his truck’s floppy rear-view mirror. She was cute, though. Kind of hot, in fact. The way she jutted her sharp chin, the fiery glint of combat in her eyes—not a woman to be taken lightly.

Too much traffic on Willamette to pull out of his parking space. Shit, he was going to be late again if someone didn’t give him a break. He imagined Brenda’s scowling face, but the image morphed into Margot’s adorable, pissed-off pout.

Her snarky outburst had knocked him back on his heels, but he got it. Some artsy folks could be terrible snobs. As a potter, he’d been on the receiving end of that kind of snooty bullshit. That’s why he dropped out of his college art program halfway through. He didn’t need art theory classes to teach him how to combine form and function. He just worked the clay until the shape pleased his eyes and hands and did the job it was supposed to do. Add a wash of beautiful color, hide a few surprises

in the decoration, and voilà: something useful that makes you think and smile—and holds your beer.

Maybe Margot would meet him for a beer at the brewery? Hell, he could even ask Maxie to come and bring Margot along. That might get past the chick's pointy defenses.

"Ask her out," Maxie had whispered as Margot came into view. And what a view: blue eyes sharp and bright as diamonds, spiky blond hair bristling, as if touching her would jolt him with a static spark. Genuine Doc Martens encased her feet, slashed vintage jeans hung low on her hips, and tiny tattoos danced across the flash of midriff revealed by her tight T-shirt. The hand she gave him was so soft, a contrast to her tough-girl vibe.

Lesbian? Maybe, but the way she jolted when she met his gaze suggested a flicker of interest. Next time he saw her, he'd probe a little more.

He gave himself a mental kick. *Cut it out, Lothario. When do you have time for romance?* After his shift at the brewery, he still had to finish building display stands for Saturday's art show and charity 10K at the Rainbow Center, then scour all his art contacts to find a new ceramics studio. Better not start something new until this mess sorted out.

Behind him, a driver slowed and signaled, waiting for his parking space. "Thank you, good sir," he said with a grin as he backed out. His elderly truck shuddered. He patted the dashboard. "Come on, baby, don't be that way."

He made his way across town toward Raven's Gulch Brewery, using the pauses at stoplights to add to his ever-growing to-do list by dictating into

his phone. “Hey, Siri.”

She beeped to life.

“Text Elmer. Order Blue Rutile glaze.”

She followed his instructions, though she mangled Rutile, a sheer glaze, into Reptile. No matter, he’d remember what he meant.

Outside, a scruffy guy with glassy eyes lurched off the sidewalk, too involved in an argument with his imaginary friend to notice Elmer’s pickup barreling toward him. He slammed on the brakes, missing the wanderer by inches. He rolled down his window and shouted a few choice phrases.

Oblivious, the guy’s only response was a cloud of intense body odor that drifted through the open window.

That reminded him... “Hey, Siri. Text Elmer. Clean slip buckets at Rainbow Center.” They were getting pretty swampy, and a few kids had complained yesterday afternoon.

On and on, as traffic crawled from light to light, his chore list grew. At the final, molasses-slow traffic light, he added, “Hey, Siri.”

She beeped, waiting.

“Text Elmer. Get Margot’s number.”

After class, Margot returned to her dumpy apartment to find her shared room empty. She peeked behind the curtain bisecting the room.

Odd. At this time of night, Charlie was usually holed up with his headphones on, engaged in virtual combat with his fellow nerds. Fine with her, since he kept the volume down with only the occasional grunt or victory hoot betraying his presence.

Across the hall, shrill laughter rang out from Madison and Taylor's room. "No, dude," one of them shrieked. "Don't give her the rose."

Wincing, she pulled the door shut and set her backpack on the floor, then sat cross-legged on the bed and opened her laptop. An icon flashed on the screen. Missed video call, ten minutes ago. Darcy.

A little thrill of nerves and desire danced down her spine as she pushed Call Back and waited. She hadn't seen her part-time lover in the flesh since her last visit in late August. Though a poor second to Darcy's silken touch, their sporadic video play sessions kept the memory fresh. Funny, though—she usually called on Wednesdays. On Friday, she'd expect Darcy to be out—better not to think about where. Or with whom. Their ongoing connection depended on adhering to Darcy's "no strings" rule. Which was fine. Absolutely. Who had time for a clingy lover? Not her, that's for damn sure.

Why waste time on wishes?

The familiar chime sounded, and Darcy's pale, angular face appeared on the screen, lips slick with burgundy gloss, pale eyes lined in smoky kohl, shiny black hair trailing over her shoulder and into her cleavage. God, how she missed the feel of that hair on her skin—cool, heavy, and smooth, like a satin glove.

"Hey there, Honeybee." Darcy's slender, scarlet-tipped fingers twirled the ebony strands. "Did you miss me?"

"Of course." No point in hiding the truth.

Darcy shifted onto her side, and one creamy breast nearly escaped her white satin camisole. Only

her dark, puckered nipple held the cloth in place.

Margot's mouth went dry, but liquid desire pooled between her legs as Darcy stroked a lock of hair round and round the firm bud. "Sorry I didn't call on Wednesday. Staff party. Blah, blah, blah." At least, that's what Margot heard—too mesmerized by the teasing image to focus on the words coming out of Darcy's lush mouth.

Margot slid out of her bomber jacket and released the top two snaps of her shirt. Should she just take it off? Darcy liked to call the shots. Better wait until she asked.

The corner of Darcy's mouth twitched upward. "You're not pouting, are you, my little Honeybee?"

"Me? No. I understand. Work comes first." She pushed the laptop back to afford a wider angle, then reclined on her stack of pillows. Over her shoulder, her plush Pikachu grinned at the camera. She shoved it out of the frame.

Darcy likewise moved her tablet back to show her whole body. She sat cross-legged on her bed wearing just a flimsy cami and tap pants. The dark triangle between her legs showed plainly through the thin cloth. "Wish I had more free time," she purred, "but I need the hours. I'm saving up for a special present."

"For me?" Margot squeaked, then cleared her throat.

"For us." A sly smile tilted Darcy's lips. "One of those Wi-fi vibrators. You know, the kind you control with a phone app. Perfect for long-distance relationships."

Still not as good as an in-person visit, but the

thought of being sweetly tortured by a Darcy-controlled gadget sent her pulse into a gallop. “Sounds fun.”

“And I’m trading favors with Dr. Nowak so I can get another long weekend.” After Nick, Clara’s new husband and Darcy’s former boss, moved from Berkeley to Eugene, she found a graduate assistant position with another professor. She confessed she didn’t know much about her new boss’s specialty, linguistic anthropology, but she knew lots about pampering the older woman with tea, snacks, compliments, and adoring gazes. No doubt, if she wanted some time off, she’d get it.

“When?” Margot squeaked again. Damn, the thought of another visit totally blew her cool.

“Soon, my pet.” Darcy reclined against a pile of pillows. “So, show me what you’re wearing beneath that butch shirt of yours.”

That stung a little. Her fitted flannel shirt, a prized find from a favorite vintage shop, was sparkly pastel plaid—hardly masculine. Nevertheless, she obeyed Darcy’s command and released the snaps one at a time.

Darcy’s ice blue eyes darkened with desire as the pink tip of her tongue slicked over her lower lip. “Pretty bra. Lacy and sweet. Take it off.”

With trembling fingers, Margot complied. Goosebumps puckered her bare skin.

Darcy’s voice dropped to a sultry alto. “Niiice. Wish I could give those sweet little tits a squeeze. You’ll have to do it for me.” Her hands cupped her own delicate breasts through her satin cami. “Like this, baby. Show me.”

She squeezed, remembering Darcy's firm touch, greedy and possessive.

Darcy chuckled. "You want me to take mine off, baby?"

"Yes, please." Why did she sound so damn squeaky? She cleared her throat and tried again, adding a husky note that reflected the desire burning in her core. "Take it all off."

Darcy's eyebrows shot up. "Aren't you the bossy one today. I'll just start with the top." She slid the wisp of cloth over her head. Her lacquered fingertips traced a lazy figure eight around and between the creamy mounds, each hypnotic pass brushing closer to her dusky rose nipples. "So, tell me about your week."

"Um, I..." How could she concentrate with that movement making her dizzy and unbearably horny? She threw a glance over her shoulder. The hallway lights still off, the bedroom door still closed. Charlie must be out for the night. Thank God. "I talked to Maxie today."

Darcy licked the tip of her little finger, then circled her nipple with the wet digit. The dark pink bud tightened. "Old lady from the bookshop? Flaming red hair? I like her." She squeezed her nipple and groaned before moving to the other breast. "Tell her I said hi."

A hungry, throbbing heat built between Margot's thighs, but if she tried to hurry things along, Darcy would just slow down, prolonging her teasing torture. "She's trying to set me up with this guy. Macho dude, ginger beard."

Darcy rolled her shoulders against the pillows.

Her hand slid down, skimming over her belly toward the waistband of her satin shorts. “Sounds yummy. You should try him out.” Her fingertips dipped inside. “I’d love to watch his beard tickling your pretty little body. I’ll bet you’d squirm, all giggling and helpless, just like—”

The door banged open and the overhead light flashed on. Margot gasped, jolted upright, and clutched her discarded shirt to her bare chest.

Charlie’s voice came from behind the curtain. “Oh, sorry, Mar. Thought you were still out. The gamers’ meetup ran late.” His voice slid into a sing-song tone. “Met a guy. This one’s promising.” His hand appeared on the curtain separating their sides of the room. “You decent?”

“Not really. I’m, uh, talking to someone.”

On screen, Darcy giggled and blew a kiss.

“Oh, hey. Sorry. We’ll talk in the morning. Need your advice.” Ever the considerate roommate, he switched on some music to afford her a little privacy. Or at least to give the appearance he wasn’t listening in.

“Your cute roommate?” Darcy asked.

Disappointment curdling in her gut, she nodded.

“Well, isn’t that too bad.” Darcy slid her top back over her shoulders and let it fall into place, covering those lovely, perfect breasts. “We’ll try again soon.” She winked. “Next time hang a pair of panties on the doorknob. Sleep sweet, my pet.” Her image winked off, leaving just a blank screen and a dull ache.

Margot shifted on the mattress. Her panties

were soaked, her pussy tingling with desire and frustration, but what could she do about it with Charlie on the other side of the curtain, eager to share his good news? In theory, they had an agreement to hang a hat on the doorknob if one or the other was engaged in something requiring extra privacy, but that happened so seldom she'd forgotten to post a warning when Darcy's gorgeous face lit up her computer screen.

She refastened her snaps and forced her scowling lips to relax. She wouldn't mind the distance so much if Darcy wanted her for herself, instead of encouraging her to explore other lovers. Like Elmer, for Chrissake. If she met him, Darcy would probably push for a threesome. Ugh. That would be so creepy. And hot. Silky black hair, fuzzy red beard, slim limbs, and muscled ones tangling around her...

She forced the stupid thought from her mind and peeked around the curtain. Charlie sat on his beanbag chair, VR goggles across his eyes, thumbs flashing over his gaming doohickey.

"So," she called out, "you met someone?"

He shut down the game, pulled off his goggles, and grinned like a kid on Christmas morning. "His name's Austin. Computer science major. It's the weirdest thing, Mar. We just met tonight, but we spent the past four hours talking. I feel like he—" He grasped her forearm, eyes bright. "He really gets me, you know?"

With an inner groan, she sat beside her friend and settled in to share his good news. *Lucky bastard.*

About the Author

Ever since her first kiss, Sadira's been spinning steamy tales in her head. After leaving her teaching career in Germany, she finally tried her hand at writing one. Now she's a happy citizen of Romancelandia, penning contemporary romance from her home in Washington State. When not writing, which is seldom, she explores the Pacific Northwest with her charming husband, enjoys the local music scene, plays guitar badly, and gobbles all the books.

~*~

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Runaway Love Story

The Book Nirvana Series Book Two

By Sadira Stone

She hates average...he's as average as they come.

High school history teacher Doug Garvey just wants to enjoy the last few weeks of summer, but receiving his divorce decree hits him hard. After a brief fling fizzles, he fears love isn't in the cards for him. If only he could find someone interested in something beyond herself, maybe a running partner who can keep up with his more carnal appetite. Then sexy, straight-talking Laurel runs across his

path, giving him hope.

He's done with social-climbing posers...she's ambitious and has big dreams.

Fired from an art gallery, Laurel Jepsen shelves her pursuit of an art career in San Francisco to help her beloved great aunt move into assisted living. While out on a morning run, she's harassed by a group of teens until a tall, broad-shouldered hottie steps in, pretending to be her boyfriend with a kiss that makes her wish it were true. But she's only passing through, not looking for a relationship.

Their fierce chemistry burns up the sheets, but falling in love would ruin everything. Laurel can't stay in Eugene, and he can't leave. Doug's only hope is to convince her the glittery life she's after is blinding her to opportunities already in her path.

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