



Twice as Hot (Tales of an Extra-Ordinary Girl)

By Gena Showalter

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But planning a wedding is never easy, especially when the bride keeps accidentally torching her dress, the groom returns from a dangerous mission with selective memory loss and the man responsible now wants Belle for himself. With Rome's ex determined to win him back and a new band of supervillains on the horizon, it will take all Belle's powers—plus a little help from her trusty empath sidekick—to save the day, salvage the wedding and prove that true love really does conquer all.

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Editorial Review

About the Author

Gena is the New York Times and USA Today bestselling author of over 25 books.

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Okay. Here's the lowdown. My name is Belle Jamison. I'm twenty-five, happy, engaged and smart depending on who—whom?—you're asking. (Sadly, my teddy bear of a dad is the only one who would pipe up with an affirmative *She's brilliant!*) I'm a former coffee wench (plus former bus driver, used-car salesman, factory worker, maid and a thousand other menial jobs), now employed by the mysterious and shadowy government agency known as PSI: Paranormal Studies and Investigations.

Oh, and I happen to control the four elements with my emotions. (If you ask my ultra-hot fiancé, Rome, he'll tell you that control is relative.) *Anyway.*

Before, I was an everyday, average, *normal* girl. Normal and wishing for more. I should have known better. Sometimes you actually get what you wish for, and the results are *not* what you expected. I'd wanted excitement. And yeah, I'd gotten it. But that excitement came with a death warrant.

See, a few months ago a crazy scientist secretly dropped a chemical into my grande mocha latte and that chemical...changed me. Belle Jamison, average no longer. Suddenly I could shoot fireballs from my eyes, freeze an entire room with a brush of my fingertips against a wall, cause a tempestuous rainstorm with my tears and start a level-five tornado with only a thought.

At first, I was upset. I mean, really. The ability to destroy the entire world and everyone in it is a huge burden to carry. But that burden also brought the sexy and insatiable Rome Masters into my life, so I don't begrudge it too much. Anymore. Plus, now that I have a little influence over my gift—yeah, that's a better word for it. Gift—people who piss me off "accidentally" get their eyebrows singed and that's pretty damn fun.

Sure, Rome once tried to kill me. Or, as he'd say, "neutralize" the threat I'd become, as I'd had yet to perfect my new powers. Sure, I later accidentally-on-purpose Tasered the hell out of him. But now we can't live without each other.

That might seem weird, but hey. Some people held hands to show their love; we drew blood. Or we would, if Rome was anywhere to be found.

"I swear, he has five seconds to call me or I'm going to torch his entire gun collection and use the melted metal to make a few necklaces. Maybe some earrings."

My best friend Sheridan looked up from the romance novel propped against her upraised legs. She lounged on the couch, a vision of curly blond hair, big blue eyes more often than not filled with sadness nowadays and curves that went on for miles. I wasn't jealous. Really. "He's called you, like, four times in the past week. And seriously, you should be embarrassed. I've never met anyone who has as much phone sex as you two."

My eyes narrowed on her. "How do you know about the phone sex?"

"Duh. I pick up the phone and listen."

I gaped at her.

Sherridan laughed. "Kidding, I was only kidding. But you should see your face. Hi-lar-iou! The problem is, you're, like, freakishly loud. Seriously, earplugs don't help."

Cranking up my iPod to full blast doesn't work. Despite myself, I've been really impressed with your skills."

Color flooded my cheeks. *This* was the problem with roommates. But better Sherridan and Tanner, my other BFF, lived here where Rome and I could protect them from scrims—supernatural criminals—wanting to hurt us by hurting our loved ones. "Never mind my incredible phone sex. Rome was supposed to call me again last night. He didn't. He hasn't. That's not like him. Do you think something's wrong?"

"Stop worrying," she said with a wave of dismissal. "That he-man can morph into a jaguar, for God's sake. He's fine. He's probably planning a surprise homecoming or something."

Yes, Rome could morph into a jaguar—a sleek and sexy jaguar I loved to pet—all because of experiments he'd volunteered for, hoping to make himself stronger to better guard his loved ones. He *could* defend himself and he *did* like to please me, so a surprise arrival wasn't a stretch, but... My hand fluttered over the pulse hammering in my throat. "Really? You think that's what's going on?" Was that neediness really mine?

"Of course."

She sounded confident. But then, she hadn't battled people more monster than human. People who could walk through walls, shift into creatures of the night and leap at you with fangs and claws bared—or simply materialize in front of you with a knife in hand.

I had. Rome had. And I had no idea what he was up against this time.

Heart thundering in my chest, I stood in the middle of the living room and studied the home I now shared with him. I'd decorated it, so of course it was made of awesome. From the bright red velvet chairs to the beaded blue pillows tossed haphazardly about to the purple lace hanging from the windows, the place was a veritable rainbow. Rome hadn't complained. First time he'd seen it, he had walked in, looked around and shaken his head with a wry smile.

"Should have expected it," he'd said, before pouncing on me for a few hours of undercover fun.

"He's never *not* called me when he said he was going to call me, Sherridan." I didn't dare refer to her as Sherri. I was the one with superpowers, but she would have found a way to peel the skin from my bones and wear it as a victory coat. "He has one of the most dangerous jobs in the world. He could be a pile of ash for all I know." *Oh, God.* Another thought like that, and I was likely to flood my beautiful rainbow living room.

Sighing, she shut the book with a snap. "All right. You need to vent, so I'll listen to you vent. But do it quickly, because Rydstorm was about to plunder Sabine with his thick, hard—"

"Sherridan Smith! Tanner's in the next room and from what I've been able to get out of him, he's still

mourning Lexis." Lexis was Rome's still-infatuated ex-wife. When she'd realized Rome loved me—and would always love me, I added for my own benefit—she had turned to Tanner for comfort. The now twenty-year-old kid-boy-man had been all too willing to console her. Virgin that he was—is?—I think he'd even fallen in love with her. But then, about a week ago, she'd kicked him out of her house, claiming she didn't want to see him again.

Tanner had been a mess ever since.

Lexis was the most powerful psychic I'd ever encountered, so I was willing to bet she'd had a negative vision about Tanner and had cut him loose because of it. While I (sometimes) liked her, though, we weren't on friendly enough terms for me to phone her and ask.

Sherridan's lips lifted in a slow, wicked smile. Her first in days, and that warmed me up inside. Between her and Tanner, I'd gotten my fill of doom and gloom. "If I know that pervert, he's watching porn."

I couldn't refute that. Tanner did like his porn.

"Besides," Sherridan said, "it's not like his superpower is supersonic hearing." She was grumbling now.

No, Tanner was an empath. A human lie detector. He could sense emotions, which was why he was the perfect partner for me. He let me know when my feelings—and thereby the world—were about to explode so that I could calm myself down.

"Call your boss, whatshisname," Sherridan suggested. "Bob...or Jim. John!" She clapped, clearly proud of herself. "Yes. Call John. He'll know where Rome is."

"I've already spoken to John. I had my mandatory testing twice this week, and he was there to watch the poking and the prodding." Because of the chemical I'd ingested and its lingering effects, John liked to monitor me. To our mutual consternation, his tests were totally screwing with my restraint. Every time he had his vampire—you think I'm kidding?—withdraw a vial of my blood, I lost a little more control and my powers went a little wonky. Yesterday I'd turned a potted plant into a treecicle simply by glancing at it.

Or maybe the problem was this distance from Rome. I needed my man. He kept me grounded, centered. He was also able to filter out the worst of my emotions. Yeah, it was probably this temporary separation that was screwing with me. It was screwing with everything else. My peace of mind, my hormones, my appetite.

Was such dependence dangerous? And did I care?

Where the hell was he? My shoulders slumped. "John wouldn't tell me a damn thing about Rome. Even when I threatened to quit."

Sherridan rolled her eyes. "You threaten to quit every day, so that's no big deal. I told you that if you didn't save the big gun for a big battle, you'd have no ammunition when the big battle finally arrived. Didn't I? Didn't I tell you that? You're like the boy who cried wolf—or jaguar in this case—and I told you not to do it. I told you."

I kicked into motion, pacing over to frown down at her. "Do you *want* to be deep-fried?"

"Please. I'm the only person brave enough to be the maid of honor at a wedding guaranteed to be a Who's

Who of Superheroes and Supervillains, so you need me. We both know I'm not in any danger from your fury-fire."

No, she wasn't. She was more likely to drown in my tears or freeze from my touch. I was depressed and scared, and my fear always summoned ice, my sadness rain. My anger summoned fire, of course, and my jealousy summoned earth. Yes, I could make dirt pies. Calling the wind required an emotional cocktail of both negative and positive, so it was the hardest to manipulate. It was hard to be happy and sad, loving and hateful at the same time.

Once, for a short window of time, I'd been able to use my powers without relying on my emotions. No longer. For whatever reason—cough John's tests and Rome's absence cough—that was now nothing more than a pipe dream.

"What if he's..." I couldn't say it. I just couldn't finish that sentence. Suddenly my chin was trembling too badly. God, I was a wreck lately! And no, I wasn't pregnant. (I'd already taken a test.)

"He's not. Who was Rome battling, anyway? And why didn't you go with him?"

"Run-of-the-mill armed guards, most likely, and I'm an idiot. Besides, Cody went with him." Cody could manipulate electricity, so he was a good partner to have. Better than me, for sure. "I've been planning a wedding, babysitting yo—uh, Tanner, researching Desert Gal and—"

"Desert Gal, huh." Sherridan sat up straighter. "You mean the psycho-bitch who drains the water out of everything she touches?"

"Yes. That's her." Unfortunately—or fortunately?—I hadn't had a face-to-face with the sadistic woman yet. One, she'd managed to elude me and two, I'd been too busy getting nailed by other scrims who'd started coming after me the moment I joined PSI. Their mission: recruit me to OASS—Observation and Application of Supernatural Studies, a nongovernment agency whose methods sometimes bordered on criminal and sometimes straight up *were* criminal. Or, if they couldn't recruit me, plan B was to kill me.

Eight had tried so far, and I'd managed to beat them all. Okay, okay, Rome had ensured victory most of the time. I was still new at the whole shadow-game thing.

"What's she look like?" Sherridan asked.

That was the kicker. No one had a picture of her. Well, not that they'd shown me. Secret agents were so... secretive. But still. I'd already proven I was trustworthy, and why not share something that would help me? "I don't know, but I'm envisioning a dried-up prune with teeth."

"Okay. I've got a visual on her now. Continue."

"One of Rome's contacts intercepted a communication between her and some as yet unknown man and learned some stuff we didn't know. Like how Pretty Boy, her former boss—you know, the evil guy Rome and I had to kill during our courtship—had several warehouses filled with people he'd locked up and experimented on. Desert Gal moved them to a central location to test them and weed out the weaklings, and Rome went to save them. But knowing Pretty Boy, and having studied Desert Gal, there were a few booby traps along the way." Just saying those two words—Pretty Boy—caused me to shudder. And I'd said them twice. Double shudder.

He'd been the most beautiful man I'd ever seen, lushly sensual, darkly erotic, yet he'd possessed a black, monstrous heart. He'd tried to experiment on me, too, as well as attempting to kill Rome. He *had* experimented on others—the ones we'd known about before his death—replacing their skin with impenetrable metal, adding animal glands to their brains so they'd have beastlike instincts. He'd done other stuff, too. Stuff I couldn't even consider without gagging. All to build an army. An army that would bring him money and (more) power.

Très cliché if you asked me.

Sherridan leaned forward, clearly intrigued. The book fell to her feet, a warrior's bright eyes staring up at me. "There were survivors?" she asked. "I thought all the people Pretty Boy tampered with ended up dying. Even the ones you guys rescued from those cages."

"They did. Well, those did. Like I said, he had other warehouses, more people. Apparently these groups not only survived, they've begun to thrive. Rome was to bring them to PSI for questioning and testing. John wants to do a little recruiting of his own, I'm sure."

"Wow, experiments that actually worked," she said reverently, her blue eyes glazing over. Then her features softened, and her mouth parted on a dreamy sigh.

Her mind was wandering.

What, she wanted to be experimented on? I shook my head and had to hook several strands of my honey-colored hair behind my ears to keep them from slapping my cheeks. "Sherridan."

No response.

I rubbed my temples and closed my eyes for a moment. If I knew my friend, and I think I did, since we'd been friends for years, she'd just entered her Happy Place. She would be there for half an hour, at least. Trying to engage her now would be pointless.

Ever since Sherridan had learned about my abilities, she'd been acting strangely, retreating more and more into her mind. Oh, she still loved me. That wasn't in question. And I knew she didn't fear me. If she asked me to blow-dry her hair from fifty paces one more time, I was going to strangle her. But there was something almost... depressed about her, as though her life now lacked excitement and adventure.

I knew that feeling.

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