

Jesse
Collar and Lash, Book 1

By

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Published by Blushing Books®,
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ABCD Graphics and Design
977 Seminole Trail #233
Charlottesville, VA 22901

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Byrnes, Roxanne
Jesse: Collar and Lash, Book 1

eBook ISBN: 978-1-62750-471-3
Cover Design by ABCD Graphics & Design

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Chapter 1

I don't know how the hell he found me.

"Jesse," he said. A statement, not a question like one might pose when you haven't seen someone for over two years and accidentally ran into them in at the mall. "Nice car. Seems like you've done well for yourself since you quit Bertram's."

I swallowed. There was no way he could know how I managed to pay off my bills and turn my life around. I told myself to stand there and smile, make chitchat, and exchange pleasantries. Don't look into those eyes. My insides were churning.

"Hi, Rourke! I can't believe it's you. I don't see anyone I know way down here. How are you?"

"Not as good as when you worked for me. No one took care of the books like you did."

I managed to hold his gaze. There was no way he could know. I had hidden things too well and if anything had come up, surely he would have reached out to me after resigning. I did move to the other side of the state with no forwarding address and took a job paying cash for the longest time. But with a man of his resources, if he knew, I'm sure he would have hunted me down.

I forced a smile. "It's really nice seeing you after all this time. I hope things are going well." I moved closer to the door of my Audi and unlocked it quickly.

"Let me help you." A wolfish smile. He took the bag from my hand, opened the back door, and laid it on the seat. "We must catch up."

"That would be great. I'm working and taking classes for my Master's and oh, I'm engaged." I flashed my diamond at him hoping that was enough to stop his invitation.

No such luck. He never took no for an answer. I don't know why I would think otherwise. Obviously, his stubborn refusal to accept any kind of defeat had not changed. Neither had the animal air about him. I always thought he was like a caged tiger, pacing and staring, just waiting for the second the door opened to pounce and maim. The muscles still bunched under the rolled up sleeves of his shirt and his jaw still pulsed when he was angry. Which was almost all the time. Pair that with the blackest eyes that refused to look away under any circumstance and animal was certainly the right word to describe him.

"It sounds like we have a lot to catch up on then," he said, flashing a broad smile now, taunting me to say no.

I said no to him once a long time ago and my life was never the same. It was one of the reasons I did what I did to survive. I had to get out of his office. Off of his payroll and far away from him. I couldn't wait another six months to carefully save my paychecks and pay off my debts. I made a hasty choice, covered my tracks well, and moved on to the next chapter of my life. I thought since so much time had passed I was in the clear.

"Um, yes. I guess we do." My mind churned quicker than my stomach. "Let me give you my email and we can set something up down the road. I have finals right now and there's so much to do with the wedding, but I'm sure we can figure something out. Nice to see you again."

Can't trace someone down easily with an email, especially since I created one just for the purpose of anonymity. There were a lot of things that I've done that I'm not proud of but that is in the past. I have a normal job, a normal boyfriend, and a normal life. And I wanted it to stay that way. Normal was safe. Rourke Bertram was decidedly not.

"Sure." Again, the smile. No, this time it was a smirk. There was no rancor at my obvious attempt to stall contact by giving him an email instead of the normal phone number contact. In fact, I didn't see any sign of anger at all. It was more like controlled amusement. And that scared me even more.

"The pleasure has been all mine, I'm sure," he insisted.

He punched my email into his phone, touched my shoulder as if we were long-lost friends finally reconnecting, and strode away. I watched him because I thought if I moved I would collapse in the parking lot. He still walked with purpose, as if he owned the world. He was a ruthless business owner with a reputation for violence if crossed. I never knew if the stories were real or not, but the fear he instilled in me on a daily basis when I worked for him made a believer out of me.

I needed a freaking donut. There was a white cellophane bag with pink writing on it tucked between the passenger door and the seat. Thank God. Carbohydrates never failed to make me feel better. I plucked that bag with iron fingers and ripped it open. Sinking my teeth into chocolate heaven, I spit it into my hand just as quick as I shoved it into my mouth. It was hard.

I closed my eyes and remembered.

I was young and stupid when I took the bookkeeping job at his firm right out of college. It was a time of weekend parties, too much vodka, and a roommate turned boyfriend that drove my life out of control. I was having the time of my life. In a short year's time, I co-signed a car with the boyfriend, rented an apartment on what was supposed to be two people's incomes, and rarely paid attention to what was charged on my credit cards. My parents had very carefully built credit for me, paid for a good education, and generally set me up for success in my life. But they never let me date. My first boyfriend was in my third year at college and I never told my family about him. He was a party boy with a sweet smile and even sweeter words. Totally irresponsible. He never even finished his degree, just kept taking a class or two, and pretended to work. By the time I realized what he did, my credit was shot, the apartment three months behind in rent and the car repossessed. When he figured out there was no money left and none to go get, he left for greener pastures. Leaving me with thousands of dollars in debt and unable to ask my family for help.

If that wasn't enough, my boss looked at me in a way that cut into my very being. He scared me, pissed me off, and brought a nameless desire out of me all at once. I didn't know what it was. Sex to me was sweet fumbings with the sweet boy who was usually unable to fulfill his end of the bargain. Kissing was nice. The rest of my first physical encounters never seemed to measure up to the hype of passion and desire. I guess most of it could be chalked up to inexperienced kids experimenting with sex, and on his part, the greater desire to drink and smoke than to develop his lovemaking skills. I just didn't have the comprehension of what a woman was capable of feeling. Nothing prepared me for the feelings that swept through me in the presence of Rourke.

I finally collapsed in the seat of the car. A part of me wanted to cry and another part wondered about the supposedly chance meeting with my old boss. It just didn't fit. After all this time, did he hunt me down or was it really just a quirk of fate?

When he was around, my stomach did flip-flops. Back when I worked for him, he had a habit of standing outside of his office door to see what his staff was doing. Never saying a word, he looked at each employee. Then he would go to the back of the room and sit on the vacant desk for short periods of time. I swear he did it just to torment his small staff of five. If I looked back, he stared at me, eyes narrowed. I caught him looking at me more than once.

One evening, minutes before it was time to go home, he appeared at my desk. "I need you to stay," he said. "There is a bid that needs to go out early in the morning and it needs to be finished now."

"But I have plans." I spoke too quickly. "I'm sorry. If we can get it done quickly it will be no problem."

He tossed a few papers on my desk and waited for me to look at them. What he needed done would take half a day. I looked up at him but didn't say what I was going to say. He was too close. He never wore suits, even on official meetings, instead preferring jeans and button down the front shirts. I could smell him. A mixture of soap and smoke. Smoke? I never saw him smoke. He leaned in close to me. Too close. I really couldn't move back without it looking like I was afraid of him. I moved my hand to pick up one of the papers. Before I could grab it, he put his hand on top of mine and pressed it to the desk. His face was so close to mine. I noticed how even though he had shaved that morning, there was dark stubble growing. I felt his presence acutely. The barely controlled anger and blatant disregard for others. And the penetrating stare of those black eyes. I didn't want him to know he affected me so I covered it up with irritation.

"Are we doing this or not?" I asked. I picked up a paper with my other hand and pretended to read.

I don't know where I got my confidence. I was generally an easy-going person but with the boyfriend problems I had just discovered, my mood was short. He glared at me but didn't remove his hand.

"I'll be glad to help out but I do have plans so the quicker I can get it done the better."

"Then get it done." He spoke quietly and lifted his hand from mine. He turned and walked back into his office. The rest of the staff said their goodnights and left. They heard the boss's request. One of the ladies who had been there forever waved her hand at me but didn't do her usual friendly good-bye, or look at me. There was an uncomfortable silence after they left.

That wasn't the first time he messed with my head either. He did it all the time. Not just the times I caught him looking at me, but I often felt his eyes on me even though I didn't turn around to confirm my suspicions. He scowled at my choice of breakfast. Donuts. Chocolate glazed or the chocolate-frosted ones filled with vanilla pudding. I loved donuts. I loved the big cups of hazelnut coffee that perfectly complimented the donuts, as well. He tugged on my

ponytail once and asked why I never wore my hair down. Well, it wasn't his business how I wore my hair or what I chose to have for breakfast. His mind games started from the first time I met him.

I remember meeting Helen the day I came in for the interview. Her first look at me as I walked into the office was one of resignation. I had no idea why. I never met her or her boss or the company, Bertram's, named after its owner, Rourke Bertram. The ad just said bookkeeper needed with highly competitive salary. That sounded good to me. I had just graduated college and the boyfriend and I were making future plans. It was before I knew the seriousness of his immaturity. We just needed more money. She took my offered resume and told me to have a seat.

I waited a half hour for the interview. I was starting to think it wasn't going to happen when Helen said I could go back to his office. Finally. I needed a job badly.

In no sense was I prepared for the sight that met me. The most incredibly handsome man was leaning back in his chair, feet propped up on the desk. His arms were crossed behind his head, eyes closed, and he appeared sleeping. He was somewhere in his thirties, dark and built like a stallion. What a sight. I stood there wondering if I should knock or just wait for him to wake up. But that flip side of me was pissed. I just waited a half hour so this idiot—hot idiot that he was—could sleep off a lunch martini?

Did I say I was sarcastic? I'm sarcastic.

He might have been a hot idiot but he was not a sleeping, hot idiot. The smile he gave me when he opened his eyes told me everything I needed to know about this man. He made me wait on purpose. And the glint in his eyes told me he didn't care that he made me wait on purpose. *Go ahead*, they said. *I dare you to say something*.

And my eyes, in typical contrary nature, said, *right back-at-you go to hell, you aren't going to get my goat*. So we both smiled at each other and pretended that none of those nonverbal greetings had just occurred.

The interview itself went well. Normal interview questions and ready-made, college approved answers. It could have been something out of a how-to video for interview skills. Then he pushed a piece of paper over to me and told me to see if I could figure out what was wrong. It was a balance sheet. The answer was something anyone in their first year of college could figure out. He grunted and pushed another at me. A little harder but same thing. Then he

said, ok, here's the tough one. I took a look at the numbers. I estimated the addition and subtraction and the different line items. It took a few minutes but then it made sense. I told him my findings. He wanted to know how I figured it out, said his best accountant didn't find it for months. I tried to explain how I saw numbers.

"This probably won't make sense to you but I see connections that others don't see. It's been that way since I was a kid. I kept failing my math classes because I couldn't learn the way they taught me. I got so frustrated because I knew things about the numbers but I couldn't show my work and the teachers wouldn't let me do it like that. I started to figure things out my own way and finally realized that others did not see the same things I did. In high school, I had an awesome teacher who listened to me. He was really smart and open-minded about mathematics. He got it. He got the way I think even though there's no real explanation for how I come up with connections. And he taught me to trust it. It's like colored puzzle pieces. I see the colors *and* the shapes where most people just see the shape. Then I just put them together. I'm actually not that good with math itself, it's the numbers and categories, and how they relate that I'm really good at."

He made an *hmm* sound. "There's more to you than most people think. Interesting."

"Yes," I stated. "And I need a job."

He said he would get back to me. I knew the bastard would make me wait. He was impressed with how I could see right through the balance sheets without much effort. My credentials were impeccable and I had great references. I even felt that he liked me but God forbid he show it. I knew he wanted me to work for him but he had to have the upper hand in making me wait. He grinned at me and told me to show myself out. He flicked his fingers at the door and looked down.

I thanked Helen on the way out. I don't think she could tell how disconcerted I felt in the presence of that man. He was too intense. Too male. Too arrogant. He looked at me like he understood my deepest thoughts in the same unexplainable way that I saw numbers. I shuddered just thinking about him. I thought about those dark, penetrating eyes all the way back to my apartment.

I was uncharacteristically turned on.

From that first interview to the final event that heaved me into action, Rourke Bertram never ceased to infuriate me. The way he walked. That self-assured, no, that cocky stride with

legs in jeans that told his employees he *owned* the very ground we walked on. The way he talked on the phone, jamming words in a low, husky tone down the throats of competitors. The flash of his eyes, as keen as a bird of prey, never missing the vulnerable creature that ran pell-mell in a doomed attempt at escape. I saw only authority and arrogance, especially on that conclusive evening.

I started comparing the bid with ones we had done before with the same company. Something didn't add up. It finally dawned on me that it was not a simple bid, but many, for jobs that would stagger over the next five years. There was no way it could be completed in an evening. I needed to go through all the old jobs to make a solid estimate and build in appropriate increases. It would probably take two days to finish exactly what he needed. Why didn't he just give it to me before or let someone else work on it during the day?

I scooped up the papers and walked over to his office. He was working on the computer.

"This is a two day job to do this bid right," I said, holding the papers up. "It needs comps and research. There's no way anyone could get it done quickly. I can start it now and maybe if Jack pulled the old bids and compiled the material lists, we could have it done by end of the day tomorrow. That's the best I can do."

Before he looked up, I had a chance to study him again. I liked looking at him when he didn't know it. His hair was black, like his eyes, but even though it was cut short, little waves escaped his efforts to stay down. There was not one ounce of softness about him. Not in the tightly muscled body, in his massive hands, and certainly not in his face. He was all male. If he ever did wear a suit, it would be like dressing up a wolf. The set of his jaw intrigued me. It was so bone hard I couldn't even imagine him smiling. For some odd reason, I had an image of running my lips along the length of it but not being able to lift my lips to his. When he was near, I felt leaden with little energy to move. I most certainly didn't feel that way with the boyfriend.

"Are you done?" His words brought me back to reality. I started to answer but realized I didn't know if he was asking about the bid or my scrutiny of him.

I recovered enough to respond. "I just told you."

He smirked. "I should have known you couldn't get it done."

"That's not fair." Again, I don't know where the confidence came from. "It's not something that can be done quickly if you want it done right. Why did you wait until the end of the day to have me work on it?"

The emotion that flashed through his eyes was indecipherable. Anger, sure, but something else too. Like maybe, he wasn't used to someone questioning his authority.

He whispered something like, 'in another place and time' but I couldn't quite make out the words. He stood up from the chair and closed the distance between us. I waved the papers in his face and he grabbed them from my hand. Tossing them on his desk, he stood over me.

I refused to move back even though my heart was beating like a machine.

We stood, inches close, glaring at each other. I still didn't understand my body's reaction to him. Half the time I faked nonchalance or irritation around him. But in reality, I was drawn to him. A part of me wanted to drop to the ground in front of him and another wanted to slap the shit out of him. It was the roller coaster feeling. Stomach careening out of control. Breathing deep, almost terror. Something inside of me trembled. I looked away first.

The next few moments changed how I looked at everything. In my world, men didn't take what they wanted. They talked sweet, brought flowers, and waited until way past having permission before even attempting to hold hands. Not this man. He leaned forward, pressed me to the wall, and grabbed my wrists.

Shock. It had to be shock. When he bent his head to kiss me, I let him. He held my wrists tightly at my sides, pressing his entire body against mine. He kissed me hard. No romance. No sweet words. And certainly no permission. He pressed, insistent and without regard to me, taking exactly what he wanted. My head bent back against the wall with the force of the kiss. My thoughts were reeling and I couldn't get my breath. Never had I been so thoroughly kissed and some dormant part of me rose from within to take what he was taking.

"Give me your tongue," he whispered.

I attempted to move my arms but his grip on my wrists was python strong. I couldn't breathe, or think for that matter, with his body up against me. In an effort to regain some measure of control, I closed my mouth.

He pulled back when I refused him. I met his eyes, even if briefly. The look was one I could only describe at the time as rage. He squeezed my wrists tighter and kissed me again. This time he forced his way into my mouth and refused to let me not respond. He started grinding slowly against me, pushing me further into the wall. His mouth moved from mine, never breaking contact with my skin as he lowered it to my neck. He bit me.

I cried out. I struggled against him, this time trying to break away but he held me easily. Panic started to set in. I couldn't make sense of the whirling emotions whipping through my body. It was like the one time when my family went camping. My Dad started a campfire with twigs and newspaper but being a man with only a limited amount of patience for those kinds of things, squirted lighter fluid on his little pile of flames. Instantaneously, the fire shot up dangerously high, making my mother and me jump back. Now, my body seemed to be doused in lighter fluid and I was on fire. A dangerous fire knowing no control or bounds.

I thrashed against him, making him press against me harder and hold my wrists tighter. I felt his enormous arousal against me. I could smell his aftershave and see the stubble of that bony jaw. His top shirt button popped open with my struggles and I noticed a hint of his muscular chest. When it dawned on me I couldn't free myself, I stopped moving and looked up at him.

"Are you going to rape me?"

He smiled an evil smile. "Maybe. But not today. I am going to hurt you though."

With those words, he lowered his head to my neck and bit me again. This time he didn't let go. He squeezed my flesh between his teeth for what seemed like forever. I cried out and started to struggle again but I still couldn't get away. I felt tears brimming but before they had a chance to fall, he released his mouth, body, and hands from me all at the same time. I slipped to the floor.

"Get out of my office."

I scurried up and without looking back, dashed from the room.

I didn't go to work the next day or the day after. I just couldn't. I kept picturing the curve of his lips, the feel of lean muscle pinning me to the wall, and the man smell of him. My senses wouldn't leave me the hell alone. But my stomach was worst. Every time the movie clip of his assault played in my head (which was constant), I thought I was going to be sick. Not sick like I would actually puke, but a wave of feeling that came close. When I closed my eyes, I could relive the moments over and over. At the time, I couldn't face my attraction to him. I was too young and naïve, too sheltered by my family, and had no experience with the storm of emotions he brought out in me.

Not going to work was an issue though. I needed my paycheck to take care of all my problems. When one of the ladies I worked with called to see if I was ok, she told me the boss

was going to be out for a week. She asked if I was better so I could do the bid that he left for me. Perfect. I never had to see him again. I came in, finished the bid, and took a parting gift of almost ten thousand dollars. My resignation was tossed on his desk. I was very skilled at numbers and accounting and thought my plan of burying the money I took in the bid was brilliant. Foolproof.