

Undercover officer Jesse Shaunessy is kidnapped and tortured, then thrown away by her department as damaged goods. The mind is a powerful ally, and 26-year-old Jesse has no memory of the abduction or the subsequent torture. Inevitably, the protective walls carefully constructed by her subconscious are beginning to crumble. Insanity, friendship, and redemption are all possibilities dependent upon one choice, one gamble, and two determined women who must risk everything to save one lost soul.

The Door at the Top of the Stairs

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Tortured to the brink of insanity, an
undercover narcotics officer hopes to find
redemption beyond...



*The Door at
the Top of the Stairs*

Alison Naomi Holt

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Chapter One

The horse bunched against the back wall as the rope slashed across his flank. Joe stepped forward to whip him again, but before he had a chance, Morgan lifted him off his feet and threw him from the stall onto the cement floor of the barn. She followed him, jerked him to his feet, rammed him against the wall and wrapped her hand tight around his throat. "I'll kill you if you ever touch one of my animals again!" She threw him toward the door of the barn. "You're fired! Get out of my sight! *Now!*"

Joe pulled up his sleeve to reveal a dark red welt on his forearm. "He bit me! What'd you expect me to do? 'Sides, you owe me money and I ain't leaving 'till I get my check."

Morgan started for him, eyes on fire, fists ready.

Joe turned and hurried for the exit, a rat scurrying for his hole. Everyone knew Morgan's temper and he wanted no part of it. He looked over his shoulder as he pushed through the door. "Mail me my fuckin' check then! I quit!"

Morgan slowed and ran a hand through her salt and pepper hair. She watched the door slam shut, then returned to Rebel's stall. White lines striped his flank, and she brushed him with her hand, wiping away all evidence of Joe's brutality. She moved up to his neck and spoke quietly, gently stroking his muzzle and forehead.

Ryland, her partner for more than ten years, walked up and leaned on the stall door. "So now what are you going to do? That's the second employee you've fired in the last two weeks. You can't take care of ten horses, thirty couple of hounds and run the farm with just two workers. You're fifty-seven years old."

Morgan had never been an easy employer. Over the last thirty years she'd exhausted the list of locals willing to work for her, and itinerant workers tended to come in sporadic bursts. She continued to stroke Rebel and shrugged. "I'll do it if I have to until I can find somebody. The hunt staff'll help me if I get into a bind, and I've put out word I'm looking. Somebody'll come along."

Morgan rode as the Master of the Myrina Foxhunt Club and she had no doubt club members would pitch in if necessary. The tack room door was normally kept locked, but she pulled on the handle anyway as she and Ryland stepped past it out into the warm August evening and walked up the winding path that led to the main house. She slipped her arm around Ryland's shoulders. "How's the book coming?"

"It's coming. The publisher wants it done yesterday. I keep telling them they'll get it when it's finished." She grinned at Morgan. "You can imagine how well that goes over." Ryland had retired from psychotherapy five years earlier on her sixtieth birthday. With three controversial books on the New York Times Bestseller list, she couldn't finish them fast enough as far as her editor was concerned.

Dusk settled over the beechnut trees surrounding the farm, and as they neared their home, Morgan could barely make out the silhouette of a person leaning against the porch railing. As they walked closer, she realized she didn't recognize the woman, and hoped she wasn't there to sell horse equipment or magazines. "Can I help you?"

The woman pushed off the porch and crossed her arms. "Lady in town said you were hiring."

Morgan studied her. In her early to mid-twenties, she had short-cropped brown hair and a permanent scowl etched into her features. Morgan held out her hand. "I'm Morgan Davis."

The woman glanced at the hand, then back at Morgan. "Are you hiring or not?"

The color rose in Morgan's face. She lowered her hand and said in a quiet monotone, "If you think I'd—"

"Look Lady, it's a simple question: are you hiring or not?"

Morgan took a step closer. "You need a job?"

"It'd be stupid to ask if I didn't."

Morgan growled, "Then if you expect me to even *consider* hiring you, shake my goddamn hand and introduce yourself. Otherwise, take your surly ass off my property." She rested her hands on her hips and figured that'd be the end of it.

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The woman surprised her by uncrossing one arm and holding out her hand, never breaking eye contact.

Morgan decided she'd be damned if she'd be the first to look away. She shook the woman's hand.

"Jesse."

"Jesse what?"

"Shaunessy."

"You ever work with horses before?"

The woman nodded.

"You have any references?"

She slowly shook her head.

"Look, I don't think—" Morgan stopped mid-sentence and frowned. Jesse had focused on Ryland who was standing nearby with an amused look on her face.

Ryland took Morgan's arm and propelled her toward the house. "Would you excuse us a minute, Jesse? We need to discuss something in private." The two women stepped into the house and Ryland closed the door behind them. She smiled at Morgan. "My dear, I think you have finally met your match."

"My match for what? I'm not hiring her. Are you crazy?" Morgan walked over to the window and looked out at the woman.

Ryland stepped up beside her. "In answer to your first question, she's the perfect match for your temperament. I have an idea she'll put up with your temper as long as you put up with hers. Besides, you really do need the help."

Morgan didn't deal well with problem employees. She'd always had a short fuse, and although Ryland had softened her over the last several years, she still expected her employees to at least exhibit a minimum amount of respect. "It wouldn't work, Ry. I think we'd end up killing each other."

Ryland shrugged. "The farm's your business and it's up to you, but I think you should give her a chance. She might surprise you."

"She wouldn't even shake my hand. That's just basic good manners."

Ryland grinned. "As long as the horses don't want to shake hands, I think you'll be all right."

Ryland's affectionate grin was contagious. Morgan smiled as she walked to the door, then hesitated. "All right, I'll give her a chance. But I reserve the right to say 'I told you so' when things go to hell in a hand basket, probably in the next five minutes." She pulled open the door, crossed the porch and headed for the barn, Jesse in her wake. Morgan didn't look back. "Minimum wage and you stay in a room we have set up in the barn for hired hands. You work six days a week. The workday starts at four-thirty in the morning and ends sometime in the evening."

When they reached the barn, Jesse's opinion of the farm rose several notches. The building looked turn of the century and had been fully restored to its original two-story design. The walls held a new coat of red paint with the trim a contrasting white. The four-sided hip roof sported new, brown shingles, and directly beneath the overhang, a double door opened onto a second-floor hay loft. Two large wagon doors took up most of the front of the lower half of the barn, but Morgan led her through a smaller service door directly to the left of the larger ones.

The inside impressed her even more. Twenty horse stalls flanked a center aisle, ten stalls on either side of the walkway. Cabinets hung on the front walls, and there wasn't a single tool out of place. Someone had painted the finished walls an eggshell white with a trim of red along the bottom and around the doors. A ladder extended down from a trapdoor in the floor of the loft, and a railing of hand-turned newel posts protected careless employees from accidentally stepping over the edge.

Morgan took out a set of keys and opened the door into the one-person bunkhouse that took up most of the front left side of the barn. Jesse stepped inside and waited for Morgan to finish with her instructions. She had her doubts about working for this woman, but she needed the job and she preferred horses to humans any day of the week. The bunkhouse was small: one room with a single bed, a small bathroom and closet, a refrigerator, and a microwave. It was all she needed.

She sized up her new boss as she watched her remove a key from the ring. The woman was a strong 5'9", with sinewy arms and legs

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and a not-too-pretty face. Gray liberally sprinkled her dark, short-cut hair and the sun had done its work on her tanned, weatherworn face, an interesting contrast to the feminine silver studs in her ears. The calluses on her hands had obviously been built up through years of hard physical labor, but her nails were neatly trimmed with a coat of clear nail polish. Jesse tuned back in as Morgan handed her the key and continued with the rules.

"No smoking anywhere on the farm. You want to smoke, you go out in the road to do it. You'll be taking care of the horses, feeding 'em and cleaning the stalls twice a day. In between, you'll be grooming, oiling tack, cleaning the barn, and working in the fields as necessary. There are two other workers who work the farm and help with the hounds and the foxhunting. Any questions?"

Jesse turned away and walked over to the only window in the room. She didn't have any questions and wanted Morgan to leave so she could settle in.

Morgan waited for an answer. When none came, she reined in her temper. "Look Jesse, there are some basic things I expect from my employees, and it's only fair to you that we go over them. First, if I ask you a question, I expect an answer."

Jesse turned and glared at Morgan. "I heard you. If I had questions I'd ask."

The muscles in Morgan's jaws rippled at the girl's surly tone. She regretted hiring her already. "Second, when you speak to me or to Dr. Caldwell, you will refer to us as Ma'am. Yes Ma'am or no Ma'am."

"I reserve Ma'am for people I respect."

Morgan crossed the room in two steps. "You listen to me, and you listen good. You push one more time—just once—and you're out of here. You give me any excuse, and I'll throw you out on your butt so fast you won't know how you got there. Now let's try this again. Do you have any questions?"

Jesse broke eye contact and looked out the window. Her pulse pounded in her ears and she wanted to shove this woman against the wall and be done with her, but all the jobs she'd been fired from in the last year came to mind. She needed to stay in one place so she could get her head together. She snapped back, "No."

Morgan held her position longer than necessary, intending to make her point. When Jesse didn't move or say anything more, Morgan stalked out the door and back up to the house. Ryland was sitting in the living room when Morgan strode in and slammed the door. As Morgan headed for the kitchen, she said over her shoulder, "If I kill her, it'll be your fault!" She pushed through the swinging door and Ryland smiled as she continued with her evening reading.

At four-thirty the next morning, Jesse was waiting near the entrance to the barn. Morgan walked up and picked up a strand of bailing wire lying on the ground. "You see trash like this, you pick it up. I keep this place immaculate, and I expect my employees to do the same." She walked into the barn and threw the wire into a barrel next to the door.

Good morning to you, too, Jesse thought as she followed her into the barn.

Morgan turned to her, hands on her hips. "I'm glad to see you can get up on time. You'd be amazed at how many people want work but can't seem to be here by four-thirty." When Jesse didn't respond, Morgan sighed. "Look, we got off on the wrong foot yesterday. Just follow me around this morning and if you have any questions, ask."

Morgan showed her a book listing the feed portions for each horse, whether a horse needed medicine or veterinary care, and whether the stable hand noticed anything Morgan needed to check. She introduced her to each horse, describing their individual temperaments and warning about biters or kickers. "Now, I don't care if a horse bites you or kicks you. If you *ever* lose your temper with any of the animals on this farm, I'll take your head off, then I'll bodily throw you out into the middle of the road and drop kick your head out to you. Got it?" She smiled to soften her words, but she intended to get her point across.

Jesse remained silent.

Morgan nodded and stepped away. "All right then. I need to go work with the hounds. I expect you to groom each horse every day and check for injuries or sores. When you're finished with that, you can start oiling the tack." She walked over to the tack room and unlocked the door, then turned back around. "Oh, and at ten o'clock,

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you need to have two horses saddled—different horses every day." Jesse's continued silence irritated her. She ran a hand through her hair and left, happy to leave this surly woman to her job and move on to her hounds.

That suited Jesse just fine. Working alone was a panacea, a time to relax and be herself. She felt on edge around people, waiting for them to do or say something stupid, expecting her to react. A lot of the time lately, they seemed to actually want her to react, baiting or pushing her too far until she lost it and took her anger out on them with her fists.

She didn't understand the changes in her life. People had always called her the life of the party. Bar hopping and barbeques had been standard weekend activities. Over the last year, she'd warped into someone she didn't recognize. Now, whenever someone spoke to her, anger boiled to the point where she had little or no control. She'd been fired from six farms in twelve months, each stay shorter than the last. Her emotional control slipped more and more each day, and she was desperately trying to hold on to the last bit of sanity she had left. She needed this job, and would put up with Morgan's temper long enough to figure things out.

Morgan returned at six that evening, and they repeated everything they'd done in the morning. Both of them worked in silence, neither having anything to say to the other. When they finished an hour and a half later, Morgan put away the last of the vitamins. "Tomorrow you'll start without me. Cody, Rico, and I will be working with the hounds. If you have any questions, ask me now."

Jesse didn't, so she waited silently, knowing it would irritate the woman.

Morgan raised her hands and walked out of the barn. "Fine, you're done for the day and I'm out of here."

Jesse smiled and went into her room. Over the next few days, she enjoyed working the long, lonely hours. She saw Morgan only sporadically throughout the week since Morgan spent most of her time working the hounds, exercising horses, tending crops or handling Hunt Club business. Toward the end of the week, after she'd finished measuring some oats and vitamins into a bucket, she heard someone

come into the barn. She grabbed the bucket off the wooden feed table and headed for Kanab's stall, wanting to finish with the night's feeding and turn in.

Morgan's voice stopped her before she'd walked half way down the aisle. "John Steinland stopped me in the feed store today. He said you told him to piss off."

Jesse stood with her back to Morgan and waited impatiently. What she'd said to the asshole wasn't anybody's business but hers.

"Did you?"

Jesse looked halfway over her shoulder. "It's none of your damn business what I say to anybody."

Morgan growled, "Don't keep your back to me when I talk to you."

Jesse slowly turned and glared, barely holding her temper.

Morgan met her stare. She'd be damned if she'd let an employee challenge her. "I'm done playing games, Jesse. You have two choices: either you play by my rules, or you get out. Make up your mind. Now."

"You—" Jesse's eyes flashed as she stopped herself from biting Morgan's head off. How badly did she want this job? That was easy. She needed it, period. She spat out her words as though they were distasteful. "I'll stay."

Morgan waited for Jesse to break eye contact, and when she did, said, "You're still my employee when you go to town. You will treat everyone you meet with respect, I don't care what they say to you. If you can't do that, you need to pack and leave."

Jesse hesitated, then snarled through clenched teeth, "Fine."

Morgan didn't take her eyes from Jesse's, and Jesse stared at the floor. They stayed like that for a long time, Morgan wanting to fire her and Jesse hoping she wouldn't. After several long moments, Morgan turned and walked out.

Jesse watched her go, wondering again why she still had a job. She reached down and picked up the bucket and finished with her evening duties, thinking about Morgan's temper and trying to sort out her feelings about working for a woman with such a short fuse.

Chapter Two

A few days later, Ryland walked down to the barn and perched on a stool while Jesse cleaned some tack. Jesse'd liked her from the first day she'd asked about the job. She methodically oiled a leather strap while she waited to find out what Ryland wanted.

To Jesse, Ryland was a handsome woman, with professionally styled blonde hair, manicured nails, and an air about her that exuded confidence and acceptance. She stood about 5'4", had some muscle tone, but obviously preferred working indoors to out. Jesse knew Ryland rode horses with Morgan every morning, and wondered whether she enjoyed any other types of outdoor activities. When Ryland didn't say anything, Jesse glanced up. "You need somethin'?"

Ryland leaned back on the stool and laced her fingers around one knee. Jesse wasn't angry with her, she knew that, but anger shot out of the woman involuntarily and her question had come out clipped and rude. "Not really. I'm just taking a break from the computer. I thought I'd come see how everything's going down here."

Jesse nodded and continued to oil the leather.

She intrigued Ryland, who'd spent a lifetime studying people. "So tell me Jesse, where does your family live? Where do you come from?"

Jesse flexed the muscles in her jaw and silently continued working on the saddle.

Next topic, Ryland thought. She sat forward and tried again. "What do you do for fun...when you're not working, I mean?"

Jesse dropped the piece of leather she'd been cleaning and reached for the can of Neatsfoot oil. "If you're trying to make polite conversation, you should probably find someone else, 'cause I'm not interested." Jesse looked up expecting an angry retort, and was surprised to see an amused twinkle in the woman's sapphire-blue eyes.

Ryland leaned back again. "You know, you remind me of someone I once knew. The thought of actually having a friend or caring about someone else absolutely terrified her."

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"You playing psychologist now?" Jesse immediately regretted her words. Why did she say things to drive people away? Annoyed with herself, she put the oil away and carried the saddle into the tack room. She felt the other woman's gaze on her as she grabbed the rake and headed for the stall farthest away from Ryland. By the time she'd finished, Ryland had gone back to the house. Jesse worked on the evening chores, then headed for bed.

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