

The background of the entire page is a deep red color. In the lower half, there is a dense field of small, heart-shaped confetti or glitter, also in shades of red, creating a textured, romantic effect.

Love In Bloom
Delilah Devlin

A Samhain Publishing Freebie

Dedication

To my readers. You make this job a joy.

Love in Bloom

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Cover Art: www.ireadromance.com

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An arm filled with red and pink blooms, Amanda Blakely tugged down the hem of her pink uniform shirt, drew in a deep breath for courage and rang the doorbell.

One minute stretched into two. She rang again.

"All this stressing out over seeing him again, and he's not even home," she muttered.

Although why she'd been so excited when she'd written down the name the woman on the phone had given her, she couldn't have said. The high-school memories she had of Dustin Fremont, if it was even the same guy, weren't exactly ones she pulled out when she wanted warm and fuzzy feelings. Maybe she was just plain curious.

Or hopeful—that he'd grown a paunch or lost all his thick brown hair.

She shifted the large bouquet in her arms and sighed. This was the last delivery of the day and she was damned if she would try him again later. The roads were getting slushy and a freeze was forecast for the area. She needed to head home soon. She gave the bell one last poke and leaned her ear against the door.

The door swung open and she fell forward with a yelp.

Strong hands gripped her forearms, holding her away, but she thrust out the hand not holding the flowers and her palm slid across damp, naked skin. When she'd caught her balance, she drew in a shaky breath, cringing inside, and lifted her gaze to meet that of the boy she'd crushed on throughout high-school.

Good lord, there was even more of him to swoon over now.

And *so*, not a boy anymore.

She forced herself to curl her fingers away from his hot, humid skin and straightened away.

"Are you all right?"

His voice was deeper than she remembered but still recognizable for the way it made her body react—with a wash of melting heat. She glanced up and lost her train of thought as her gaze locked with his hazel eyes.

She cleared her throat and nodded, the greeting she'd rehearsed evaporating from her mind like the droplets of water on his skin.

He'd changed. Gotten...thicker. *Everywhere*. Tanned skin stretched deliciously over a well-muscled frame.

She had a reason for being here—but what was it? She was sure it had nothing to do with the towel beginning to loosen at his waist.

"Flowers," she said, thrusting the bouquet of roses and carnations at him.

The blossoms slapped his naked chest and he instinctively curved an arm around them, his expression bemused.

He should have looked ridiculous, holding a pretty, feminine armful of flowers against his golden chest with a white towel tucked around his hips, but Mandy couldn't suppress the little whimpering sigh that slipped between her slackened jaws at the sight of all his manly glory.

His head canted at the sound, his gaze narrowing on her as though seeing her for the first time.

"They're for you," she said stupidly, wishing the ground would open up and swallow her whole.

His gaze went to the flowers and his eyebrows lowered as he stared at the bouquet, a hint of irritation that pricked her to gather her wits.

"There's a card. From Simone. Says thanks for...everything. Not that I know what 'everything' is, but she told me what to write. Phone in order." She clamped her lips shut to keep from babbling more.

The corners of his lips twitched. "Guess I should get them into water."

"She seemed especially eager to get them to you today," Mandy blurted, then turned crimson. She sounded accusatory. Like it was any of her business why a girlfriend of his would send him flowers as a morning after thank you.

"It's not what you're thinking, I'm sure," he said, his tone wry. Then his eyes narrowed on her again. "Do I know you?"

Rather than answer the question because she'd already embarrassed herself enough, she blurted again. "I was thinking you must be really good." Good lord, had she really just said that?

"I'm not—" He shook his head. A bark of laughter shook his chest. "Guess I can't deny it too much or you'll think I'm gay or sexless."

"I'd never think that." Sweet Jesus, would she ever learn to just shut up?

"I know you. That voice."

No doubt, he recognized her penchant for babbling at him every time he'd smiled at her in the hallway at Reagan High. Her cheeks burned. "Um," she pointed her thumb down the hallway. "I better go. Delivery boy called in sick. Hope you like the flowers." She turned and hurried away.

"Wait! What's your name?"

Amanda kept on walking, pretending she hadn't heard him. He'd never known it in high-school. Now she was double-damn sure she didn't want him learning it today.

Amanda turned the corner, hurrying toward the elevator and hit the button. Her heart pounded so loudly, she never heard him coming.

A finger tapped her shoulder. "You didn't stick around long enough for me to tip you."

The glance she aimed over her shoulder slid down to his towel, which was still loosening. Because she didn't think she could take the stress any longer, she reached for the ends working their way free and pulled them together, retucking them at his hips.

When she realized what she'd done, she froze, her fingers still trapped against his skin.

The elevator door slid open behind her and she didn't dare glance back.

His still features didn't change. Must have been in shock, which suited her fine.

Things couldn't get any worse, but she had to get away. She pulled free her hand and stepped backward into the elevator, her mouth gaping when his towel puddled at his feet. The doors slid closed between them.

"Oh my," came a breathy whisper from behind her.

Mandy glanced at an elderly woman whose grin stretched wide across her face.

"Thanks, my dear. I've wondered about him for years."

"You're welcome," Mandy muttered.

The elevator stopped twice more on the way to the bottom floor. Only then did she breathe a deep sigh of relief, happy the ordeal was over and ready to go back to the shop to lick her wounds in privacy. Seriously, could she have mucked things up any worse?

She stepped out of the elevator, but only made it three steps before a hand wrapped around her wrist and she was pulled into the stairwell next to the elevator and trapped against the wall and Dustin Fremont's broad chest.

"I didn't want a tip," she said, shocked to her toes that he'd run down four flights of stairs to stop her. But why?

"We weren't finished."

She glanced down. The towel was back in place. She wasn't sure if she felt relief or not, but now that she knew exactly what the fluffy terry hid, it wasn't any protection. And what it hid tented against the material.

"Ignore it," he bit out.

"Impossible," she sputtered.

"Your own damn fault."

"How? Did I ask you to answer the door naked?"

"You rang the bell three times. You could have taken that as a hint I wasn't ready for company."

"I didn't want your flowers to wilt," she said, then pressed her lips together as she fought the urge to cut her gaze down to the towel again.

"So you can conduct a conversation," he said slowly, his voice deepening to a sexy rumble.

"This is an argument. Which we can end as soon as you let me go."

He snorted. "Go out with me."

"What?"

"Sorry, but there's a breeze in this stairwell and I don't have time for niceties. A date. I buy you dinner. You tell me your name."

"I know what you're packing. Think I don't know what you really want?"

"Is that a problem?"

If anyone else had said that she'd have slapped him silly, but hadn't she been thinking about just what he inferred even before he opened the door to his apartment?

Before she'd rang his bell, she'd tried to shore up her confidence to ask him out, reminding herself that she owned her own business, sat on the neighborhood development committee where she could string reasonably educated sentences together, but then she'd reverted to a stammering geek at the first sight of his manly frame.

Some dreams were best left behind in high-school.

"I respectfully decline, Mr. Fremont."

"Why?"

"Has no one ever turned you down?"

"No."

"Then let me teach you one of life's little lessons. Sometimes, you can't have what you want."

A deep exhalation caused his shoulders to droop. His hand dropped away. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to assault you."

"Since I didn't exactly conduct myself like a lady either, I forgive you."

He cleared his throat and one hand went the knot at his hips to hold the towel in place.

She breathed a little easier.

"Who are you?"

Mandy rolled her eyes. "I'm the delivery girl for Passionate Posies."

"Your name."

"You always this stubborn?"

One corner of his mouth kicked up. "I've never exposed myself to someone whose name I don't even know."

"Well, let me be the first. I have to go." Since he still cut off the exit with his bulky frame, she gave him a pointed stare. "It was nice seeing you again." Then her cheeks flushed with heat when she thought a second about what she'd just said.

One side of his mouth slid up. "Wish the 'seeing' had been mutual."

Impatient now because his expression was filling with amusement the redder her cheeks got, she pushed against his chest. "I have other deliveries. You'll get me fired," she lied.

"Sure," he said standing to the side to let her leave. "And I better get back before someone calls the police."

"Or takes a picture. I'm sure this isn't the one you want posted in the business section."

He quirked an eyebrow. "You've seen my pictures there?"

"I'm a business woman myself. Of course I read that section."

"I'll be seeing you again."

She shrugged. "Bound to run into each other sometime."

When she left him, she couldn't help the smile that tugged at her lips. She'd survived. And she'd intrigued him. She knew it from the glint of challenge in his gaze.

No one had ever turned him down before.

Dustin turned over the card he'd found stuck in the bouquet and tapped the glass to get the cabbie's attention. "Hey, would you hang a right at the next street? I have a quick stop I want to make."

Flowers. He needed something to give his secretary. She might have a coronary that he'd thought to bring her something for Valentine's Day. But she'd worked for him for eight years; it was about time he thought of something besides the blueprints.

And why not check out the florist shop responsible for yesterday's delivery? The identity of the flustered woman who'd fallen across his threshold was still driving him

crazy. He knew her. Maybe he'd even dated her. Something about all that strawberry blonde hair, china blue eyes and complete lack of sophistication sparked a memory.

Once he'd figured it out, the mystery solved, he could move on.

After he'd satisfied more than his curiosity. Since she'd first fallen against him, nearly tugging his towel off in the process and raised those wide baby blues, he'd been snared.

Part of him was bored with his usual go-to list. Not that there were many. He hadn't had a lot of time to meet anyone new in months. And the ones he did know didn't make it past the third date before they started leaving things behind in his apartment. And since none of them were what he was looking for, he quietly deleted their numbers from his speed dial and got busier at work to make sure he was never available for their calls.

A coward's way out, but he didn't like dashing hopes. Hated a woman's tears because they made him feel guilty. And he didn't have anything to feel guilty about. He never led them on. The women he dated tended to think too highly of themselves, like clinging to his arm at a function was a favor he owed them something for.

They weren't what he wanted.

The girl in the pink-bibbed uniform shirt probably wasn't either, but she was different. Lacking any poise or artifice. Lacking even the ability to hide her intense interest in what lay beneath his towel because her gaze had slipped downward one too many times, her cheeks blooming with color to rival the roses she'd slapped against his chest.

He thought he might enjoy giving her plenty of reasons to blush. He turned down the collar of his jacket, pushed through the glass doors, and entered a fragrant garden.

Passionate Posies wasn't what he'd expected. Sure flowers were arranged in vases, but the wild colors and the size of the arrangements hinted at a lush sensuality.

An older woman looked up from the sales counter. "Can I help you?"

"I'm looking for a woman," he said, grimacing at her instant grin. "She works here. She made a delivery yesterday.

The woman's gaze sharpened, then gave him a brief onceover that had him gritting his teeth because the sparkle in her eyes said she knew what had happened.

"She's in the back room, working on an arrangement," she said, pointing to a door behind her. "You can go on back."

He reached for the counter ledge and lifted it, heat flushing his cheeks because she craned her head to watch him pass. What the hell else had the delivery girl told her about him?

When he walked through the door, he caught sight of his quarry sliding a long-stalked flower into an arrangement bursting with color.

Her back was to him, and apparently she hadn't heard the swish of the door closing behind him, which suited him fine because this time he could look his fill.

Not just a delivery girl, he thought, noting the way she played with the grouping of blooms and long ferns.

Her wildly curling hair shivered around her head every time she turned her head to eye the arrangement from a different angle. At last, she must have been satisfied because she reached behind her to untie the bow at the back of her pink apron and began to draw the garment over her head.

The blouse she wore beneath it rose as well, and she was half out of her shirt before she realized the problem.

"Dammit," she muttered, reaching for the hem of her blouse but finding her arms trapped inside the armholes of the apron.

He stepped forward, and lifted the coverall and the blouse the rest of the way off. "That better?" he murmured.

She gasped and spun around, her hands covering her breasts.

"Not so funny when the shoe's on the other foot, huh?" he drawled.

She eyed the tangle of clothing she'd just shed, and then straightened her shoulders. Her hands dropped to her sides and she gave him a glare that dared him to say something else.

"I'm heading out to grab a bite," the older woman called from the shop room. "I'll lock the door on my way out."

The blonde in front of him rolled her eyes.

He moved in closer, liking the way her cheeks flushed a deeper rose the more he crowded in. Any other woman he knew would be eyeing him with catlike satisfaction. "Is she matchmaking?" he murmured.

She wrinkled her nose, and her hands swung forward then back like she still wanted to cover herself. "She probably poked her head in the door and saw you stripping me and jumped to all the wrong conclusions. Why are you here?"

"I came about that date."

Her eyebrows shot up. "You came all this way because I turned you down?"

Dustin shook his head. Sure, he'd been a little taken aback that she hadn't said yes, but that wasn't why he'd made it a point to seek her out. Watching the emotions slide over her face and mobile mouth aroused him more than any woman's practiced smile had in a long, long time. "I came because I really wanted to see you again."

Mandy blew out the breath she'd been holding. He'd said exactly what she wanted to hear, but it was likely a line he'd used hundreds of times before.

But who was she kidding? Her whole body had tingled with excitement the second she'd realized who had helped her out of her shirt. "All right. I'll go out with you. But it'll be late. Tonight's the longest day of the year for me. I've been going since before dawn. I have Valentine's Day deliveries lined up until eight."

"Don't bother dressing up. We'll do something casual. Can I pick you up?"

She reached for the notepad and jotted down her address, then stepped closer to give it to him, forcing her gaze to meet his and catching his flicking over the tops of her breasts again.

"I don't remember those. I think I would have if we'd ever dated."

"Late bloomer," she muttered.

"Nice. Gonna use those shears on me if I try to kiss you?"

The shears sat next to the notepad and she pushed them away. Then she realized what her action implied, but he was already moving in.

Not that she was complaining. The hands that slid around her bare waist were warm and strong. The face lowering to hers so handsome she sighed as their lips met.

The kiss was soft, exploring. His lips caressed hers. Mandy lifted her hands and placed them against his chest, as much to brace herself because her knees were weakening, as to feel the flex of steely muscle as his arms wrapped around her.

He broke the kiss. "I should go," he whispered.

She nodded, unable to form a single word. Her hands slid up his chest, around his neck and she rose on tiptoe to kiss him again.

Her aggression sparked a fire. His mouth landed on hers, his tongue stroked inside.

Mandy dug her fingers into his hair and kissed him back, meeting his thrusts with eager forays of her own.

When his hands landed on her bottom and lifted her to the edge of her work table, she wrapped her legs around his hips to bring him flush with her body.

Her bra gave beneath the flick of his practiced hand and her breasts spilled into his palms. Thumbs swept her nipples, then fingers plucked the tips.

Their mouths went wild, lips suctioning, tongues tangling.

The phone rang.

Dustin lifted his head. "Don't answer it."

She groaned. "Busiest day."

His eyes closed, his forehead met hers, and he dragged in deep, ragged breaths. "Tonight."

She nodded, too overcome to play coy. "We'll stay in."

His eyes opened. "Am I moving too fast for you?"

She blinked. "I've been waiting for this forever."

Dustin hadn't any patience with the elevator in her apartment building and ran up the six flights, arriving slightly out of breath at her door. He hoped she hadn't had second thoughts. Not that he'd blame her. Things had gotten out of hand and quickly at her shop.

Still, he'd be in hell all night if she decided to slow the pace. His cock had throbbed all afternoon and he hadn't wanted to ease the tension while he'd showered because he didn't want anything surrounding him that wasn't her.

Her arousal had been a beautiful thing to witness, adding rose to her cheeks, a sparkle to her sky-blue eyes. He checked his joy at her door, worried now that she might not feel as eager or as enthralled as he did after his second encounter with Amanda Blakely.

He'd filched a business card from beside the cash register before he left the store so now he finally had a name for the woman he'd kissed amid the blooms and leaves littering the work table in her store.

Taking a deep breath, he eyed the flowers he clutched in his hands and hoped like hell a florist who worked with them all day long wouldn't think him unimaginative, but he hadn't known what else to bring. The pink roses were the color of her cheeks when flushed with passion, the irises the color of her eyes. He'd had the florist add baby's breath for the hint of innocence her eager passion exposed, and yellow daisies because looking at them made him think of spring and the hope that she'd still be with him to enjoy the change of season.

He rang the doorbell then stood back, feeling eager and awkward and hoping like hell she met him with a smile.

Then the door flew open and there she was. She was dressed in faded blue jeans with frayed holes at the knees and an overlarge tee that draped her body to mid-thigh. But she'd foregone a bra—and he couldn't manage to look away from the ripened little tips that poked against the blue material.

"I'm up here," she said.

He dragged his gaze upward, feeling a blush heat his cheeks, only to find a grin stretching her mouth. "I took you at your word," she said, still smiling. "You said casual. I don't like underwear between me and my clothes when I'm home."

His mouth dried in an instant and he pushed the bouquet toward her chest.

Her laughter bubbled over and he relaxed. "Guess I know how it feels now," he said softly.

"Yeah, kinda takes your breath away. Nice flowers," she said, lifting a brow.

"I'm not sure what it means. This feeling."

Her expression shifted to something more thoughtful. "Then we won't label it. Not yet. But I do know where it's heading right now..." She reached for his hand and pulled him inside her apartment, past the living room and straight into the darkened bedroom at the end of a short corridor.

"We could order in food first," he said, trying to remember he ought to be a gentleman since he wanted more than just a one-night stand, but she was already pulling her shirt over her head and crawling onto the mattress. A second glimpse of her small rose-tipped breasts and the narrow indent of her waist had his palms itching to touch her again. He toed off his shoes.

Mandy turned and rested on her elbows. "I thought we might finish what we started since I haven't been able to think of anything else all damn day."

A smile stretched his face at the frustration brimming in her voice. Warmth filled his chest at her expression. She acted in control and self-assured, but her wide eyes gave away her anxiety.

He stripped quickly, donned a condom while he could still think to do it, then strode toward her. He removed her jeans without saying a word or letting her help and crawled over her, settling his weight on top of her. "We'll do this, seeing as how eager you are to finish. But I want more."

She lay still beneath him. "More?"

"Mandy, I want to know you. I'll be seeing you again. Past the third date."

Her gaze lowered to his chest. "Sounds almost like a commitment—for you."

"I have to be truthful. I don't know how to do this."

The corners of her lips twitched. "I've watched a few movies. I think it starts with you putting your penis inside me."

Laughter shook him. "That's not how it starts. What kind of guys have you been dating?"

Finally, she met his gaze again and gave him a little shrug. "That's not something a girl tells a guy."

"Ah hell," he whispered then slid his cock inside her. He should have been a little scared about how good it felt. How momentous it seemed. But all he could concentrate on was the silky warmth surrounding him and the way her mouth parted around a breathy sigh. "What's the next step?"

Her fingers cupped his cheeks. "You kiss me like you mean it."

"What do I mean?"

"That you want to be with me. That this isn't just about sex. That you really do want to see me past that third date."

"Sounds easy enough." He kissed her, not moving his body although his cock ached to thrust deep. Instead, he rubbed his lips against hers, slipping his tongue inside when she opened beneath him to tangle joyfully with hers.

When their mouths parted, he felt a rush of satisfaction because her lips were blurred and her eyelids drooping. "Think we might move onto the next thing?"

Her arms came around his back, and she set her cheek against his shoulder. When her thighs parted and lifted to cup the sides of his hips, he took that as permission and began to move.

And he had moves. Knew how to make a woman come apart, but with Mandy, he wanted this first time to be about more than sex. He wanted true connection, not calisthenics.

Rising on his elbows, he held her gaze as he began to rock forward and back, tunneling deep inside her. Moist heat gloved him, caressing every inch of his shaft. He moved steadily, setting a slow pace and watching for her changing expressions to tell him when she needed more.

When her fingers dug into his back and her body arched beneath him, he rose on his arms and strengthened his thrusts. He scooped his mouth against hers. "Tell me, baby. Tell me what you need."

"Just this. Perfect," she moaned. Then she turned her head and her eyes squeezed shut. He knew the moment she started coming apart because her pussy pulsed around him, drawing him deeper.

Unable to hold out a moment longer, Dustin closed his eyes and hammered his hips against hers, flying over the edge, his whole body tensing as he gave a muffled shout and came.

As he fell against her, her arms enclosed him, her hands sweeping up and down his back in comfort. He'd never wanted this part with another woman, but thought it might be every bit as beautiful as the sex itself.

The woman made all the difference.

The next morning, Mandy eyed the bouquet then grinned at Dustin across the table. "Interesting choices. Daisies are my favorite, you know."

Dustin ducked his head. "I wasn't sure what to bring a girl who worked in a flower shop."

"It's a cinch she likes flowers. Always a safe choice."

"That's what I thought." His expression, when he finally looked up again held not an ounce of his usual, edgy bravado.

"You didn't have to, you know."

He shrugged. "I wanted to do more, but I had a hard time concentrating."

"Yeah, I arrived at three doors yesterday with the wrong flowers."

His eyebrows lifted and dipped in a wicked waggle. "No one met you in a towel?"

She laughed. "That was a first for me. Memorable. So do you remember me yet? From high-school?"

"Lab, right? But you used to wear glasses. That's what threw me off."

She nodded, but narrowed her eyed. "Right. The glasses did it. Not the fact I didn't have boobs or a cheerleader's outfit."

He had the grace to grimace. "I guess I was pretty shallow."

"That's okay. Shallow saved you for me. So does this count as the third date?" she asked cheerfully.

"Because we did it three times? No."

She pouted her lips. "Darn. I was hoping to get past it so I didn't have to worry anymore."

"You don't, you know. Have to worry, that is," he said quietly. "I like you."

"I like you, too."

"I think we have something."

And because she didn't know how to respond to that without crying all over him, she went for a joke. "Terminal stammering?"

"I think we have something special. I've never said this to a woman before, but I think we should go slow."

"You mean no sex?"

"I mean," he said, lowering his eyebrows, "we take this in stages. Like building a house. Pour a foundation, put up the frame. Be deliberate."

"Because me jumping you scares the snot out of you?"

He gave her a glare. "Because I want this to be special. To do everything right."

"You don't think it already is?"

He blew out a breath. "It's not something we could tell our kids about."

Her mouth dropped open.

"Too soon? I know," he said, his confusion apparent in his blue-green eyes. "That's why I said we should go slow. Didn't mean to scare you."

Happiness bubbled up inside her. "No, I don't mind you mentioning it at all. And if that's where you think this might go, then we should. Go slow, that is. But can we do that after you take me back to bed? Because you can't just say something like that and get me all turned on and not do anything about it." She stopped to take a breath and her shoulders slumped. "I'm babbling again."

His shoulders shook with silent laughter. "I don't mind. I kinda like that I can shake you up that easily."

He held out his hand and Mandy slipped from her chair and settled into his lap. They held each other for a while, listening to each other's heart beats, thinking of the future and all the wonderful possibilities.

"I do remember your eyes," he said, kissing her forehead. "You used to stare at me over the top of those ugly glasses."

"I thought you were dreamy."

"You helped me get a B. I would have flunked if you hadn't been my partner. Did I ever thank you?"

Mandy leaned away and grinned. "I think you just did. Three times."

About the Author:

Delilah Devlin is an award-winning author with a rapidly expanding reputation for writing deliciously edgy stories with complex characters. Whether creating dark, erotically-charged paranormal worlds or richly descriptive westerns that ring with authenticity, Delilah Devlin *"pens in uncharted territory that will leave the readers breathless and hungering for more..."*

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