

Feisty Pants

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Chapter 1

"So, Jessica... what do you say we make a deal? If you don't take out a private investigator's license..."

"Yes?"

"I won't buy a typewriter."

"Deal."

As he held out his hand to seal the deal with a shake, Thomas Magnum had to smile when he saw his new friend lay out the palm of her own with a sly expression. He gave the palm a hearty slap and Jessica Fletcher's laughter rang out like the pure tones of a steel guitar. He should've known he wasn't going to have it his way even in the end, but he didn't care. He'd grown to respect the heck out of this woman during the time they'd worked together. Stubborn and feisty, she'd gotten on his nerves at first when Pamela Bates had called her in to assist on the hit-and-run case, but when she stood up for him after he'd gotten slapped with a false accusation and his butt thrown in jail, his heart was won over... much to Higgins' chagrin.

Higgins didn't fool him. Robin Masters' majordomo had scoffed at the whole notion, claiming that a lady like Jessica didn't need to be hanging around with a bum P.I., but Magnum knew better. Higgins was jealous. He'd had a crush the size of the Big Island on Jessica from the instant he'd clapped eyes on her, to the point where he'd served Maine lobster salad in honor of her arrival and was now considering taking his vacation in Cabot Cove. Of course, after they'd busted the killer together, Jessica and Magnum had shared a warm embrace and Jessica kissed Magnum on the cheek, which did not sit well with Higgins. The P.I. and the majordomo had then had it out when they'd returned to the Masters estate.

"Higgins, there is nothing going on between Jessica Fletcher and me. She's just a good friend."

"That's what they always say."

"Oh, get serious. Jessica's a very attractive woman, but she's old enough to be my mother. I'm not interested in her in that way at all, trust me."

"That's precisely my point, Magnum. I don't trust you as far as I can throw you, which believe me, I would dearly love to do."

"For Pete's sake, Higgins, get the wad out of your panties. I know you're in love with her."

Higgins shot Magnum a glare over his nose. "Once again, Magnum, you prove your remarkable talent for hyperbole. I like her very much, but I am not in love with her. Although..." Here the majordomo's expression went wistful. "She does have many qualities that any man would find very attractive."

Magnum grinned. He had Higgins pegged; he knew it. "Such as?"

"Her glittering intelligence. Her literary talent. Her beautiful heart and exuberant spirit."

"You sure blonde hair, big blue eyes, and a smile that could stop traffic have nothing to do with it?"

Higgins' glare returned. "I will readily admit that Jessica is quite a beautiful woman, but that is not all I see when I look at her. I, for one, happen to admire her spunk. When it comes to seeking justice for those wrongfully accused, her determination is indomitable."

"For once, I gotta agree with you. If Jessica wasn't as feisty as she is, she wouldn't have tackled this case with half as much resolve." Magnum smiled again. "You should've heard her ranting about Captain Browning."

"Well, that is understandable. That man could make a nun swear."

"He almost made Jessica swear. I think she would've given him a heck of a tongue-lashing if she'd had the chance."

"It would have been an eloquent speech, no doubt." Higgins shook his head. "My God, how the spirit of a woman can intoxicate a man."

"Drunk on spunk, are you? That golden Maine vintage?"

"I am not in love with Jessica Fletcher, Magnum."

"But you do love her feistiness."

Higgins' expression softened. "Yes. I do indeed."

Me too, Higgins, *Magnum thought to himself.* Me too.

That feistiness shone through even now as Magnum slapped five with Jessica and gave her a one-armed bear hug as they walked to the car, where Higgins stood waiting to drive them to the airport to meet Jessica's flight. "Thomas, you nearly took my hand off with that low five," she chuckled. "You have an arm like Muhammad Ali!"

"And charm like Cary Grant, don't forget that."

"Funny, I had you pegged as more of a John Wayne type. I can easily picture you in the saddle of a horse."

"Well, I deal with the other end of the horse often enough, so why not?" Magnum grinned when she laughed again. "No, Jessica, I have horses already. 255 of them, to be exact."

Jessica's head swiveled around to face him. "You own 255 horses?"

Magnum laughed. "No, not really. They're all under the hood of Robin Masters' Ferrari."

"Robin Masters lets you drive his Ferrari?"

"Uh-huh. Since I test the security on the estate in return for living here free, I also get to drive the car. And let me tell you, it drives like a dream. Juice that engine up, hear her roar, and she flies down the road like a bat out of hell. I wish I could take you for a ride before we go to the airport. You'd love it."

Jessica checked her watch. "Well, why not? I still have an hour before my plane leaves. We can take a quick ride and then come back."

Magnum's eyes widened in surprise. "You really want to go?"

"Yes! I may not be able to drive, but that's never stopped me from enjoying a fast spin with a good friend, especially one with a lead foot."

Magnum felt his face break into a smile. "You know, Higgins probably isn't gonna like this," he said in a tone that told the world just how little he thought of what Higgins would and wouldn't like.

"Higgins isn't going to like what?"

The two of them looked up when Higgins spoke, having clearly overheard part of their conversation. Fortunately, Jessica took the reins immediately. "Jonathan, Thomas was just telling me about Mr. Masters' Ferrari, and I suggested a quick ride before we go to the airport. I have an hour before my plane departs, so there's plenty of time."

Higgins' eyebrows shot up. "You actually want to go for a ride in the Ferrari with *him* behind the wheel? Jessica, he makes Mario Andretti look like a garden snail. If you ride with him, you'll get whiplash in two seconds flat."

Jessica waved a hand. "It can't be any worse than other car rides I've experienced. Jonathan, I want to do something *fun* before I return to Cabot Cove, something I can tell my friends about – other than the murder investigation, I mean. And I haven't been for a joyride in quite some time. I trust Thomas. Don't you?"

Not a lick, Magnum thought, knowing that the look on Higgins' face was saying the exact same thing. He wondered if the majordomo was ever going to answer when Higgins sighed and gave Jessica a small smile. "You're sure you'll feel safe? That you'll be all right?"

Jessica returned his smile with a sunny one of her own. "I'm positive."

At long last, Higgins nodded. "Then go with my blessing. I just need to have a word with Magnum."

Oh boy, here it comes. Magnum stepped forward and faced a now-glaring Higgins. "A word, Higgins? Usually you have more than one."

"Don't get clever with me, Magnum. I'm warning you right now. No matter how fast you tear around the island, you treat that woman like the most precious cargo you've ever carried. If anything happens to her, I will set Zeus and Apollo on you and tell them dinner is served."

"Yeah, and if you do that, Jessica will charm them both like Snow White charmed the animals," Magnum retorted. "Higgins, don't worry. I will keep her safe, but she's feisty enough. She'll take care of herself."

Higgins' expression cleared. "Of that, I have no doubt. Even so..." The majordomo gave him the hairy eyeball one last time before waving him back toward the house, where the Ferrari was parked. "Go on. Get out of here and try not to have too much fun."

"No such thing, Higgins," Magnum commented as he and Jessica set off to the Ferrari. A minute later, he knew it was the wrong thing to say, for Higgins followed them all the way to the car, watching them like a hawk the entire time.

"What a gorgeous car," Jessica said once they'd reached the red sports car, Robin Masters' pride and joy.

"Isn't she a beaut? Just wait 'til we put the top down and get moving," Magnum said with a wink as he opened the door for Jessica, then got in on the driver's side and put the keys in the ignition. "You sure you still want to do this?"

Jessica shot him a look. "With all due respect, Thomas, shut up and drive."

Magnum barked a laugh. "All right, Feisty Pants. Whatever you say."

Now it was Jessica's turn to laugh. "Feisty Pants?"

"Feisty Pants," Magnum repeated, starting the engine. "Trust me, it's a compliment. If it hadn't been for your spunk, my butt would still be sitting in jail. You wore the pants in that investigation and you're feisty as heck, so..." He winked at her. "Feisty Pants."

Jessica chortled. "Well, I guess I have a new nickname to take back to Cabot Cove with me. I just hope my friend Seth never gets wind of it, because he'll never let me live it down."

"Relax." As Magnum put the top down and caught sight of Higgins standing within earshot, no doubt listening to their entire conversation, he grinned slyly. "If Higgins takes his vacation in Cabot Cove like he says, you can just tell everybody it's his pet name for you."

Higgins' indignant shout of "MAGNUM!" was lost in the roar of the engine and the roar of laughter from Jessica and Magnum as the Ferrari shot out of the driveway and onto the road that wound through paradise.

Chapter 2

The beauty of Oahu turned to a blur and whirl of colors as Magnum gunned the Ferrari along the back roads of the island, so fast that Jessica felt like she was flying. The cool wind whipped through her hair and invigorated every pore of her body, charging her blood with adrenaline and sending a jolt of pure excitement shooting straight to her heart, kicking the beats up a notch or two. This was the escape she'd longed for upon coming to Hawaii, the fun, the adventure. Finally, after trouble in paradise and enduring delays and stubborn idiots to expose not one, but two killers, Jessica felt free to enjoy herself. And who better to help her escape from it all than Thomas Magnum? The man clearly had a fantastic sense of humor and an even better sense of adventure, which suited Jessica perfectly. Sometimes it was nice to just run away, and Magnum, it seemed, understood the idea very well himself. She looked his way and smiled and he returned it with an equally big grin of his own, shifting into third gear and giving the Ferrari some more gas. The car, psyched by the sudden boost of energy, roared even louder, dug its tires into the pavement, and rocketed down the road as though the blacktop didn't have an end in sight. The wind slapped Jessica in the face with cold hands and her stomach went flying into her throat as they lurched forward, then backward when the Ferrari's equilibrium adjusted faster than a finger snap. But she wasn't scared. This was *fun*.

"Whoo-hoo!" she screamed, letting out a great whoop of laughter and throwing her arms up as they flew along.

Magnum laughed himself. "I knew you'd enjoy this!"

"Are you kidding? This is the most fun I've had in a long time! The weightlessness, the adrenaline, the feel of the wind in your hair... it's incredible!"

"Just like flying, huh?"

"Exactly like flying!"

"Now, see, if you'd had Higgins taking you for a ride around the island, you'd be outstripped by a ten-year-old on a bicycle. With me, you get windblown and your stomach settling into your hips, the way a joyride is meant to be."

"Oh, Thomas, I'm sure Jonathan could take someone for a joyride if he wanted to."

Magnum snorted. "Please, Jessica. Higgins wouldn't know what a joyride looked like even if it pranced butt-naked around Robin's Nest."

Jessica hooted. "You're exaggerating. He can't be that uptight!"

"Oh yes, he can. He and I are constantly arguing over work, the car, music, how much access I have to the estate, you name it. Higgins never says it in so many words, but it's a constant implication that I should be grateful that Robin Masters lets me live there for free." A funny half-smile crossed Magnum's face at these words. "Which is kinda ironic if you take my little theory into consideration."

"Theory? What theory?" Jessica asked, her interest now piqued.

"You're gonna laugh at me."

"No, I won't. Cross my heart," Jessica said, crossing an X over her heart.

"Okay." Magnum steered them around a curve in the road before speaking again. "I think Higgins *is* Robin Masters."

"*What?*" Magnum would not have been surprised if Jessica's eyes popped right out of her head. "You think that Higgins and Robin Masters are the same person?"

"Yup."

Jessica shook her head, her mouth still open in disbelief. "Would you care to elaborate on your so-called little theory?"

"Hang on a second. I want to show you something." Magnum took a right turn onto a trail that led off the main road, navigating them through a short stretch of lush tropical foliage before pulling the Ferrari out onto the most breathtaking overlook Jessica had ever seen. She caught her breath at the sight of the city of Honolulu perched out on the ultramarine blue of the Pacific Ocean like a crown jewel, the azure sky overhead dotted with fluffy white clouds and the entire landscape bathed in brilliant sunshine. "My goodness," she breathed. "What a view."

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Magnum said happily, pleased that his surprise was a success. "There are a lot of lookouts on Oahu, but not too many people know about this one. I come here sometimes just to be alone and to think."

"I can relate to that," Jessica said softly. "Sometimes I take a walk out on the cliffs in Cabot Cove to do some soul-searching."

"Well, there's no better place for it."

Jessica cast him a sideways glance. "Does this lookout have a name?"

Magnum shrugged. "I don't know. I've done some research on it, but as far as I know, no book has ever given a name for it, and it's not on any map. And I don't want to ask around because this is my private spot. No sense in letting the cat out of the bag to anybody. But you, I know I can trust to keep this place a secret."

"My lips are sealed." Jessica made the lock-and-key motion in front of her mouth.

Magnum nodded and continued on. "The first time I ever found this place was at night. I was out for a drive, this trail just appeared out of nowhere, and I decided to drive it and see where it went. When I ended up here, I was blown away. Honolulu lit up in the distance and more stars than you could shake a stick at. That's why I decided to call this lookout Hokunani – Hawaiian for 'beautiful star.'" He looked out over the gorgeous view. "So

you can see why I like to keep this spot private. I've never even told Higgins about it."

The mention of the majordomo's name sparked a memory of their previous conversation. "Oh yes, you were going to tell me why you think Jonathan Higgins is really Robin Masters."

Magnum gave the steering wheel a gentle tap. "Oh yeah. Well, I've been living at Robin's Nest for a long time, and I've never once seen the supposed Robin Masters face-to-face. I've gone to several events that he was allegedly supposed to attend, and he never showed up. However, Higgins has been at nearly every one of those parties. Think about the party we went to. Robin Masters wasn't there, but Higgins was."

"That could just be coincidence, Thomas."

"Yeah, you'd think so, but Higgins also has a military background and knows more about espionage, criminals, and weaponry than he lets on, perfect knowledge for a mystery writer."

Jessica smiled. "Thomas, I'm a mystery writer and I don't have a military background. That doesn't mean that Jonathan is Robin Masters."

Magnum shrugged. "Believe what you want; that's just my theory. I also think he's Robin Masters because he's the only one those stupid dogs answer to."

"Dogs?" Jessica asked, puzzled. "I don't remember seeing dogs on the estate."

"Higgins probably put them up so they wouldn't scare the crap out of the ladies. They're a couple of Doberman Pinschers named Zeus and Apollo, and they hate every human being on the planet except Higgins." Magnum rolled his eyes. "He babies those dogs. Calls them 'the Lads.' Lads, my butt. They're like the hounds of the Baskervilles."

Jessica laughed. "That bad, huh?"

Magnum shot her a look. "Jessica, he feeds them raw meat. And just before we left, he threatened to sic them on me if I didn't keep you safe."

"Is he really that protective of me?" When Magnum nodded, Jessica shook her head. "I appreciate the thought, but I don't see why he should be *that* protective. Just because I'm a novelist? He's only known me a few days, for heaven's sake."

Magnum smiled. "I know, but I think he feels like he's known you for a lot longer than that. And it's not just because you're a novelist, either."

A small frown mark appeared between Jessica's blue eyes. "I don't follow."

"Jessica, Higgins likes you. I don't mean like in the platonic sense. I mean he *likes you* likes you, as in he has a whale of a crush on you."

Jessica's eyes widened to the size of quarters. "Thomas, are you serious?"

"I'm dead serious. Didn't you see his reaction the first time he saw you? He practically had his tongue hanging out on the floor. And he's bent himself out of shape since trying to impress you. Maine lobster salad in your honor, showing off his knowledge of ballistics, and beating up bad guys for you? He's got it bad."

Jessica's expression betrayed nothing but disbelief. "I don't see why he should have it bad. I'm just an average woman, not some raving beauty."

"Higgins doesn't think so. He thinks you're beautiful. And he really admires your spirit."

"My spirit?"

"Yeah. You've got more spunk than most women I know. That's why I called you Feisty Pants in the first place," Magnum teased, elbowing Jessica gently. "And it's also the main reason why Higgins likes you so much. He called it, quote-unquote, 'your exuberant spirit.'"

Jessica chuckled. "Is there a Hawaiian phrase for that?"

"I know a similar one: Nani 'uhane. It means 'beautiful soul.' I think it's safe to say that that's what Higgins would call you if he had a drop of Hawaiian blood in him."

Jessica smiled. "Well, I'm touched to know that he thinks I have a beautiful, exuberant spirit. I just can't believe he thinks I'm beautiful on the outside as well."

"Why not? You *are* beautiful." When Jessica gave him a surprised expression, Magnum simply shrugged his shoulders and grinned. "Hey, I'm a guy. I can't help noticing if a woman's beautiful."

"Don't let Jonathan hear you say that, or he'll have your head, if he is indeed sweet on me."

Magnum snorted with laughter. "If he'd walked in either time the two of us were in our robes, he'd have had my head."

"Yours? Why only yours?"

"Let me put it this way. Higgins doesn't trust me with half the accommodations on the estate, and he sure as heck doesn't trust me with a woman he happens to be sweet on. If he'd come in when I was in *my* robe, he'd have thought I was trying to seduce you, and if he'd walked in when you were in *your* robe, he'd have thought I was going to take advantage of you. I would never dream of doing that to you, but Higgins wouldn't see it like that. Either way, my butt would've been flank steak for Zeus and Apollo."

Jessica laughed. "Thomas, I know you wouldn't do something like that! Jonathan may not trust you, but I do."

A smile creased Magnum's face. "No kidding?"

"No kidding. Any man who risks his life to save my friend and then goes out of his way to clear his name and help me catch a killer has earned my trust... and my friendship." Jessica reached for his hand and gave it a good squeeze. "You're a good man, Thomas Magnum."

Pleased with her chosen gesture of friendship, Magnum returned the squeeze with one of his own. "And you're a heck of a lady, Feisty Pants." He glanced at his watch and turned the keys in the ignition, waking the Ferrari from her sleep. "And we'd better get going, or you're gonna miss your flight."

Jessica's brow creased slightly as Magnum steered them back onto the main road. "Will I be late?"

"Not on my watch." And with that, Magnum put his foot down and the car blasted down the blacktop, the joyride beginning all over again.

They reached Robin's Nest in record time and, with Higgins driving, got Jessica to the airport with time to spare. Higgins shot them both a jealous look when Jessica hugged Magnum and thanked him for everything, but the envy evaporated when Jessica not only hugged him as well, but kissed him on the cheek and expressed her hope that she would soon see him in Cabot Cove. And then, with a wave, she was off, leaving two happy men behind: Higgins with the knowledge that his vacation to Maine would indeed be a lovely one thanks to one lovely woman, and Magnum with the feeling that, for him and for Jessica, this was the beginning of a long and beautiful friendship.