

HIGH-OCTANE KISSES:

Writing Action with Heart

Ann AGUIRRE, Laura BRADFORD, Carrie LOFTY, and Elisabeth NAUGHTON

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In this panel discussion and Q&A session, agent Laura Bradford and three authors who write very different stories—from urban fantasy and paranormals to historicals and *Romancing the Stone*-style contemporaries—will discuss their love for action-packed stories. Hear techniques for making your novel more exciting *and* more emotional. Learn how to emphasize the deeper connection between the hero and heroine as they bond over moments of danger, as well as plotting techniques that create fast, emotional, cinematic stories. For everyone from plotters to pantsers, this discussion can help add passion and pulse-pounding adventure to every page.

Back in the early '90s, when every author and her sister decided to write Westerns, the “snakebite scene” became common fare. A man and a woman, thrown together in the wilds of the frontier, denying every last romantic feeling they might ever have for one another, find themselves confronted by the height of awesome, kitschy drama: a snake. Preferably hungry. And deadly. What’s a romance couple to do?

The snakebite scene is just another kind of action. Action in romance is there to further the plot *and* also to further the romance, providing physical danger and an opportunity for the hero and heroine to connect. They’ve been thinking it all day, of course, but action scenes force them to interact in a potentially romantic way *with purpose*, under the heightened duress of near-death.

The result of these high action, often traumatic scenes is always the same: the her and heroine must admit unacknowledged feelings—always to themselves. I nearly lost him! I almost lost her!

Thus action in romance is best achieved when the hero and heroine are forced to a) secretly acknowledge deeper passions, which ups their confusion and sets personal dynamics on edge, b) bond over the trials of survival and build a shared history, and c) initiate physical contact.

These events will haunt them in the pages to come, the fear of nearly having lost something special, and the knowledge that even more of that something special awaits them. These action scenes are not enough to bring about a happy ending, instead setting them on the path toward “happily ever after” as the continue to battle common enemies and each other.

Always think of action as a means of increasing emotion. No action for action’s sake. So if your hero and heroine need a quick castle escape, for example, have them run through a crowd of May Day revelers. They’ll need to blend in with the dancers, holding each other, dancing together. He’ll see that she’s not quite the evil harpy he assumed, and she’ll realize that being held by him is a damn good thing.

OUTLINE

- **Opt for Action:** push your hero and heroine into dangerous situations that will not only propel the plot, but enhance their emotional connection.
- **Keep it Moving:** be ruthless in the use of dynamic prose that makes the action sharp, compelling, and clear.
- **Slow it Down:** remember that romance is at the heart of these stories, so give your hero and heroine moments to breathe—and connect.
- **Give Us Detail:** provide details that ground the reader in your world—no matter the genre—to make larger-than-life stories believable.
- **Find the Flaws:** embrace the human foibles that bring these supermen and women down to a relatable level.
- **Tug the Heart:** recognize that the heart of *any* romance depends on readers being able to identify with sympathetic characters and convincing emotions.
- **Expect Varied Responses:** prepare for the gamut of reactions to action romances, from ecstatic fangirls to readers who chastise the violence.

SELECTED EXCERPTS

BLUE DIABLO by Ann Aguirre
(Roc/Penguin; April 2009)



“Yeah,” he said grimly. He laced his fingers through mine, not a romantic gesture but as if in preparation for a blizzard where we needed a non-visual link to make it across the street. “No matter what happens inside, don’t let go of me, Corine.”

My mouth felt dry. “I won’t. I promise.”

We stopped behind a warehouse, the reason he’d chosen this neighborhood in the first place. It was a hulking structure with blank windows, no signs of life. There should have been a night watchman on duty, but at the moment it felt as though we were the only two human beings left in the world. The wind kicked up, sending trash skittering across the dead-quiet street. Something besides cloud cover blotted out the stars, and the air felt heavy as lead when I brought it to my lungs.

Stooping for a moment, Chance finessed the padlock on the back door, another skill set I never examined too closely. The door squealed like a piglet being slaughtered as we pushed past into cloying, copper-scented darkness. His fingers felt reassuringly warm in mine. I’d never read a building before, but as what my mama called dead man hands ran down my spine, I knew bad things had happened here. Folks ignored that creeping chill, as if it sprang from an overactive imagination, but they probably had a latent gift if they felt a ghostly touch on their skin.

His penlight clicked on, a tiny isle of light surrounded by the shadows that surged with purpose around us. Boxes and crates took on their own identities, sinister shapes crouched in wait. He ignored them and led us deeper into the labyrinth.

“Here,” he whispered as we found the crime scene tape. “They found her purse here.”

I knelt, running my free hand over the cement. It was too big for me to read, but I might get impressions. It sparked a little, a blue shock.

Blood. Pain. Death.

If I had anything in my stomach, I would have tossed it up. Something died here; there was no mistaking the necrotic tinge, smeared over the floor like rancid butter. But I couldn’t quit.

“I need something smaller, something I can hold,” I said.

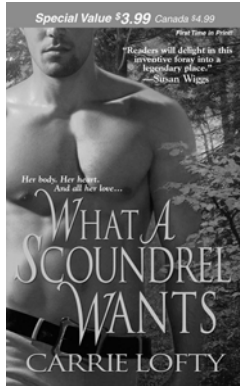
Closing my eyes, I ran my fingers over the floor. I imagined I could feel the tackiness of dried blood, texturing the stained cement. I explored the corners of crates nearby and cracks where something interesting might sink. In one of those fissures I found a small round object with beveled edges. It singed my fingers just in picking it up; oh yes, it held an active charge, secrets to share. I slid it into the narrow beam of Chance’s pen light.

“A button,” he said with sharp, wicked delight.

“I shouldn’t handle it here.” Though I couldn’t have explained my certainty, I knew it was beyond dangerous for us to linger.

“We need to get out of this part of Laredo entirely.” Chance pulled me to my feet in a neat motion that reminded me how strong he was, stronger than he looked for such a lean frame. “Try to lose them before—”

His words died in a nightmare of imploding glass as they found us.

WHAT A SCOUNDREL WANTS by Carrie Lofty*(Zebra Debut/Kensington; December 2008)*

Icy water splashed and soaked her gown, weighing her skirts. Boots found traction on the slippery stones through force of will alone. Her fight for air became a losing battle, but on she ran through the shallows.

At some point, Scarlet had abandoned his leather gauntlets. Bare fingers enveloped hers. Abruptly, he wrestled her into a clump of forest shrubbery and pinned her. “Hendon’s right behind us.”

A parade of heartbeats passed before he eased his grip. His thigh settled between hers. She shifted, a startling awareness streaking through her limbs. “Did you have to manhandle me?”

“They would’ve seen us. And I cannot fight them.”

“Your arm?”

Defeat colored his voice. “’Tis foul.”

“May I touch it?” He stilled, hair tickling her forehead when he nodded. “If we weren’t this close,” she said, “I wouldn’t know a nod from a blink.”

“Do what you must.”

She traced the wound, striving for gentleness. The gash was relatively shallow but longer than her palm, extending from his collarbone to the thick muscle of his upper arm. Splinters of ruined mail peppered hot flesh. Warm fluid slicked his skin. He hissed despite her caution.

“You won’t be conscious in an hour,” she said. “Already, you have a fever.”

The sound of snapping branches and rough steps interrupted. She held still, imagining herself a rabbit. What that made the man sprawled on top of her—she could not decide.

“Surrender, Scarlet, or we’ll ravish the girl.”

Hendon.

“I assume you have eyes,” she whispered, her lips pressed against the coarse stubble of Scarlet’s jaw. “Eyes that work?”

“Yes.”

“Then your choice of hiding places disappoints me.”

“You choose next time.”

“Can you handle your sword?”

His hair fell across her face again, teasing her with their intimacy. “I said I cannot fight, woman. I am...blast, but I’m dizzy.”

“I said nothing of fighting. Can you *stab*? And be my eyes?”

“I don’t understand.”

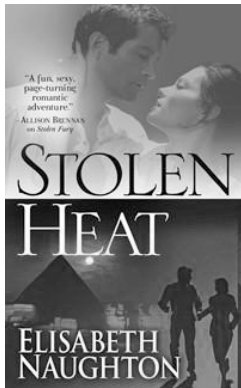
She loosened the laces of her alms-bag and retrieved the small copper vial it contained. A tiny bubble of laughter wiggled free. “No thinking, Scarlet. Follow my lead.”

She shoved the hard wall of his body until he relented and rolled aside, leaving behind an unsettling sense of disappointment. Standing side by side, she groped for his bare hand and clasped it tightly. The frustrating tremor in her limbs eased, ushering a return of clear thought.

Strange, that rush of calm. Simply holding his hand. Hours earlier, she would have fought the Devil’s own army for the right to gut him.

And she might again, as soon as they killed Hendon.

STOLEN HEAT by Elisabeth Naughton
(*Love Spell/Dorchester; July 2009*)



Wait. He could *smell* her.

Time seemed to stand still as the impact of that realization plowed into him. His heart ratcheted up a notch. She continued to kiss him while he went cold all over.

In all his delirious fantasies about being with Kat again—the ones he'd never cop to, no matter what—he'd always been able to see her, to feel her, even to taste her to some degree. But never, not once in all the times he'd had this recurring dream, had he ever been able to *smell* her.

Now he could.

She was also on fire. Like liquid heat against his skin where she burrowed closer to him.

You couldn't smell dreams, and they sure as hell weren't warm.

Confused, caught between a dream state and reality, he gripped her arms, pushed her back and squinted to look up into a face he'd never expected to see again in this lifetime.

"Kat?" He croaked out the word, didn't dare move as those wide, molten chocolate eyes ran over his features.

"Yeah," she whispered. "It's me."

No way.

He bolted, not sure what was happening. All he knew for certain was his kinky sex fantasies had never taken this detour into insanity before. He scrambled from the floor and was nearly knocked over by a wave of nausea that made him grip the door handle again to keep from falling to his knees.

She was up and next to him before he could catch his bearings. "I know how this looks, but if you just give me a minute, I can explain." She sounded frantic. A little scared. And completely wiggled out.

Holy fuck. That made two of them. "What the..." The pounding hit his skull again with the force of a jackhammer, and he pressed his fingers against his temples. "This isn't real," he muttered to himself as he gave his head a strong shake. "Can't be real. I'm hung over. Really hung over. That or I've got a brain tumor." He squeezed his eyes shut. "MRI. That's it. I need a goddamn MRI."

She reached out for him. "Let me—"

He flinched and jerked away from her hand. If she touched him again he was afraid he wouldn't be able to think straight. And right now he really needed to clear his damn head so he could figure out just what the hell was going on.

She dropped her arm like he'd burned her, reached up with one hand to wrap her fingers around a pendant of some kind hanging from her neck. "The least you can do is listen to what I have to say, Pete. Believe me, I wouldn't have dragged you into this if there was any other way."

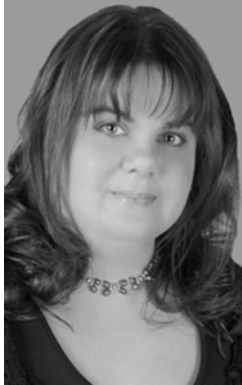
He barely heard her words, but registered the bite. Though at that moment the only thing he could focus on was the charm hidden in her fist.

He pushed her hand away and fingered the silver medal between her breasts.

St. Jude. Patron saint of lost causes. Kat had always worn it. Never took it off. And the sudden memory of that medal falling against his chest as they made love was as vivid and real as the warm and solid weight now in the palm of his hand.

His eyes shot to her face. She was real. This was happening, and, holy hell, she was *alive*.

BIOGRAPHIES



Ann AGUIRRE is the author of *GRIMSPACE* (Ace: 2008) and the upcoming *BLUE DIABLO* (Roc: 2009), the first of a new urban fantasy series. She's been a clown, a clerk, a voice actress, and a savior of stray kittens, not necessarily in that order. She grew up in a yellow house across from a cornfield, but now she lives in sunny Mexico with her husband and two adorable children who sometimes do as they're told.

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Laura BRADFORD began her career as a literary agent at Manus & Associates and formed Bradford Literary Agency in 2001. An editorial-focused agent, she takes a hands-on approach to developing proposals and manuscripts with her authors. Her mission is to form true partnerships with clients and build long-term relationships that extend from writing the first draft through the length of the author's career. Currently, Laura is acquiring all types of romance, erotica, women's fiction, mystery, thrillers and YA.

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Carrie LOFTY's debut, *WHAT A SCOUNDREL WANTS* (Zebra: 2008), is the hot, adventurous tale of Will Scarlet and his dangerous lady love. The sequel, *SCOUNDREL'S KISS* (Zebra: 2009), pits a Spanish warrior monk against the troubled English translator he's sworn to cure. Carrie earned her MA in history from Ohio State University. Now she writes fulltime and manages the talented authors of Unusual Historicals, a blog she founded in 2006 to celebrate romances set in unusual times and places.

www.carrielofty.com and unusualhistoricals.blogspot.com

Elisabeth NAUGHTON writes sexy romantic adventures from her home in Western Oregon. Her debut, *STOLEN FURY* (Dorchester: 2009), was a 2007 Golden Heart Finalist in Romantic Suspense. Two more books in her "Stolen" series are scheduled to follow in August 2009 and February 2010. A former junior high science teacher who loves to travel, Elisabeth served as the Mid-Willamette Valley RWA president in 2008.

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